

UNITY

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Clerical reprimanded for taking water bottle to reception area

By John Oertel
Staff Writer

Life in the New Haven, Connecticut Social Security Office can't be easy.

Since Sylviane Haldiman took over about three years ago, management has instituted a dress code (even though the agency doesn't have one), locked-up all the office supplies so employees have to ask for everything (including pens and paper clips), and told the staff not to take beverages to the reception area or front-end interviewing desks.

Working conditions in New Haven recently got much worse for Chaisnel Ford, a clerical employee with several years of service, when Operations Supervisor Eric Williamson reprimanded her for taking a drink to the reception desk.

"This carpeting is only 18 months old and...spills cause concern because the stains are ruining the appearance of the rug," Williamson stated in his reprimand, which was two pages long (single spaced), but he never offered any proof that Ford ever dropped anything on the carpet.

In her grievance, Ford wrote that "it is not fair and equitable treatment to reprimand me for a behavior that is common practice across

the Region and for other employees in this office who even on that day had drinks at the FEI/ Reception counter without consequence."

Williamson claimed his action would "promote the efficiency of the service," but Ford disagreed with that notion:

"It does not promote the efficiency of the service to ban water at the reception counter but in fact hinders it as far more time is wasted in removal of oneself from the FEI/reception area thus making the public wait longer. Also it is unhealthy and rude to choke on dry air – especially in front of claimants."

The grievance was denied and George Sincavage, a Union official and Area Vice President for Connecticut, says the matter will go to arbitration.

"Management is going after her," Sincavage told **UNITY**. "They just don't like her, even though she's a good, hard worker. Ms. Ford goes above and beyond for the public."

He also pointed out that she has been "counseled" about wearing a blue-jeans jacket to work (which didn't comply with the manager's self-imposed dress code). Williamson also suspended her for two



days because she processed a Social Security card application "while claimants were waiting to be assigned to an interviewer" and Ford was hit with an AWOL charge in early 2007 after taking emergency leave to care for her nine-year-old son who was out of school.

"She's a single mom and she couldn't find day care around the holidays. She also had over 130 hours of annual leave," Sincavage said. "There's no reason she should have been charged with being AWOL. That matter is set for arbitration."

He noted that if Ford had left her son at home alone while she went to work, she could have been prosecuted for child abandonment or neglect. Article 20 of the 2005 National Contract guarantees that Social Security will be liberal in granting leave when child care issues are involved.

SSA pushing more third-party assistance

By Steve Kofahl
Vice President, Seattle Region

The Social Security Administration (SSA) has twice cut staffing in field offices, and each time, the agency has turned to third party organizations to “assist” the public in completing disability applications. The first time this happened was in the late 1980’s, when about 17,000 positions were lost.

We are now in the midst of a second onslaught and approximately 6,000 positions are being eliminated. Current staffing will soon be at its lowest levels in 35 years – just as a large number of “baby boomers” get ready to stop working. Office closures throughout the United States are also a concern.

SSA is *actively training* non-profit and for-profit organizations to perform disability claims work again and it also wants employers to get involved in the retirement claims process. Employers were approached in the 1990’s about this idea but they declined out of concern for their own liability.

Social Security has determined that it is an “inherently governmental function” to make a decision about entitlement or benefit amounts, but the agency also freely outsources these same functions to third parties without any competition and with no opportunity for SSA workers to show they can do the best work for the American public. Because third parties have provided incorrect medical and non-medical information to SSA (through ignorance in some cases and fraud in others), they effectively make decisions which harm the people they should be serving.

Third parties are always moti-

vated by a desire to entitle the applicant. If the claimant gets approved – the third party gets paid. It’s just that simple! Non-profit organizations like state and county welfare agencies want to transfer responsibility for medical care and income support to the Federal Government. In other words, it saves them money!



During an era of labor-management cooperation in the mid-1990’s, senior SSA officials and AFGE leaders agreed to thoroughly examine the issue of third party claims. Recommendations were later made and they were supported by a great deal of data that had been collected and analyzed over a 20-month period. A nationwide survey of SSA managers and staff revealed that third party involvement was NOT more efficient and there were serious concerns about quality and integrity.

Independent investigations conducted by the Office of Inspector General uncovered fraud schemes and questionable fee-charging arrangements. Non-profit organizations -- including a religious order -- and for-profit organizations (including one run by a former SSA manager) were implicated in wrong-doing. Criminal middlemen, state government employees, and at

least one physician were convicted of stealing money from applicants and taxpayers.

How did the agency respond to the ideas put forth by this cooperative effort? It pulled the plug on the workgroup, refused to even consider the ideas, and announced it would do whatever it wanted with regard to third party claims.

Congress should insist that the union-management recommendations be seriously considered for implementation and that expansion of third party involvement be halted in the interim. It is time for agency leaders to take responsibility for protecting applicants and taxpayers in the claims process.

For more information about the team’s findings and recommendations, please contact me at stevekofahl@aol.com.

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Rep escorted out of SSA office by FPS

Management in the Cleveland Southeast Social Security Office recently showed its disdain for Union representative David Sheagley.

He went to the office to speak with bargaining unit employees about an incident which occurred two days earlier involving another Union official (Darlene Tinsley) and Supervisor Earl Lee.

"I had sent an e-mail to the manager (Bobby Reynolds), telling her that I would be in the office," Sheagley said. "I also told her that I would need a computer, a phone, and a private space to talk with employees and I asked her to release employees to speak with me – but I never got a response from her though I knew she had read the request."

Sheagley managed to speak to a few members of the bargaining unit before Reynolds accused him of disrupting their work.

That was followed by a meeting in the manager's office.

"It got to the point where they (Reynolds and Lee) instructed both of us that while we're on official time, we cannot talk to the employees about any subject, even the weather, except on their breaks or at lunch," Sheagley said. "That is a clear violation of the contract and Reynolds knows it."

During the meeting, there was also a heated exchange between himself and Lee. A short time later, while Sheagley was working quietly at a desk on union business, Reynolds told the security guard to escort Sheagley out of the building.

"I identified myself as an AFGE representative," he said. "The guard asked me if I *wanted* to leave and I said no. That's when he called the FPS (Federal Protective Service).

After a few minutes they showed-up and I was doing the 'perp' walk out the building, but they didn't put any handcuffs on me."

Sheagley then called Witold Skwierczynski, the President of AFGE Council 220, who contacted Ralph Patinella in the Office of Labor-Management Employee Relations (OLMER) in Baltimore.

"Patinella wouldn't do anything," Sheagley remembers. "He took management's side."

An Unfair Labor Practice (ULP) has been filed over the incident – but that's just one of many which have been brought against Reynolds. There have also been problems with the office leave roster, consistent by-pass, management failure to communicate with Union representatives, changing rules on approval and use of official time, and harassment of Union members on official time

Alabama manager transferred after UNITY article; employees ecstatic

Bargaining unit employees in the Cullman, Alabama Social Security Office are still celebrating the departure of their former manager, Maia Burchell.

An article in the November, 2007 UNITY pointed out that several members of the public had written to Atlanta Regional Commissioner Paul Barnes about Burchell's job performance. A former SSA employee wrote that she "berated an illiterate man...for not being able to navigate the kiosk to receive a number for his turn (in the lobby)."

Shortly after that story was published, Burchell was transferred to the office in Decatur, Alabama. She was named Assistant Manager, but

Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor:

Seven years ago, the office where I last worked (Reading PA) had ten Title 2 Claims Representatives. Today there are six. Over those years, (the workload) increased by at least one-third. Internet applications haven't really helped. There is virtually no time savings.

Congress must be made to realize that cuts and computers can't solve SSA's problems. We are dealing with *people*. And, to deal with people, you must have people, not a computer.

I had hoped to survive to 40 years with the agency, but I realized the stress wasn't worth it and so I retired (after 39). I really did love my job and got a great deal of satisfaction in trying to do it well, but with the reductions in staffing, it has become impossible to do the quality job the public deserves.

Jim Mortland, Retired TE

this is a lateral position and NOT a promotion.

"We're hoping she has turned-over a new leaf and we're willing to give her another chance," said an employee in the Decatur office.

The former ADM in Decatur (Greg Roy) was transferred to Great Falls, Montana, where he took over as District Manager. That job was once held by Diane Artist, but she retired in August, 2007 after being profiled on the front page of UNITY. Artist faced a long list of grievances, unfair labor practices, and EEO complaints. One incident involved Artist writing-up a female employee for wearing thong underwear to work.

Council's Winky New retires as RVP

Council 220 has lost another experienced member to retirement.

As Regional Vice President for the Chicago region, Winky New was on the Council's Executive Committee before leaving earlier this year. She was also (and will continue as) Executive Vice President of Local 3448.

"I'm glad that I am going to still be involved. It would have been very hard just to walk away from everything all at once," New said.

She joined Social Security in 1977 and became an active Unionist nine years later after transferring to Dayton, Ohio.

"There was no Union in the two Kentucky offices where I worked for eight years. When I transferred to Dayton and heard Union members talking about a proposal they had received from management, I wanted to put my two cents in. I found out rather quickly that the Union rep would gladly accept my input," she said.

"It was several years before I became a local rep and then a few more before I became an officer in the Local. I enjoyed being a local rep during those years because I liked taking employee concerns to management and negotiating with management on their proposed changes. Although it was still an adversarial relationship, we had a voice. It was just a different time."

Like many people, New believes the change was brought about by the current administration and the resulting 2005 contract:

"We lost partnership and ended up with a lot of managers who said 'under the new contract, we can do whatever we want to.'"

Her future plans include more

reading, traveling with her husband after he retires later this year, and seeing more of their grandchildren.

"I am *not* looking for another job," she stressed.

What will she miss most about her Union work?

"The people," she answered quickly. "I'll miss the regular contact with members and local reps in offices throughout Ohio. Being on the 2005 Contract prep committee

and then a regional vice president also afforded me the opportunity to get to know and work with Union officers in the Chicago region and throughout the country.

"It was truly an honor to work with many of the talented, dedicated Unionists we have in Council 220, and I appreciate having had that opportunity."

Arbitrator rules in favor of Union

The Social Security Administration spent a lot of time and money investigating Dana Duggins, but in the end, it was a wasted effort.

Duggins is a full-time Union official who's also on the Council 220 Executive Committee. She works in the Redding, Calif. District Office and it was her former manager, Polly Van Benthusen, who gave her a five-day suspension for allegedly misusing a Government credit card in 2002 and 2003.

"Polly had a history of treating female employees very badly," Duggins said. "For three years in a row – and *always around Christmas* – she fired women who had children and who were also the sole support of their families. When she ran out of single moms to terrorize, she came after me but I was ready to fight!"

Duggins' case was heard by arbitrator Thomas Hemer, who recently ruled in her favor. In his decision, he noted that an SSA Claims Representative with two years of experience had also been disciplined for credit card use.

"(The other employee) committed 159 violations," Hemer wrote,

"resulting in \$9,787.83 in charges for personal expenses, and was also given a five day suspension. The Agency justifies this by stating that the two year employee had mended his ways. I find that the difference in this disparate treatment is based on the fact that one was a regular employee, and the Grievant (Duggins) is a Union Representative (with a blameless record of 19 years of employment with the Agency)."

"That statement says it all," Duggins believes. "I never did anything wrong with my credit card, but Polly deliberately went after me because of my Union activities."

She was represented at her arbitration hearing by Joe Henderson, an attorney in AFGE's Office of the General Counsel.

"Joe did a great job. He pointed out every flaw in the agency's arguments," Duggins said.

SSA has filed "exceptions" to the decision (meaning it disagrees with all or part of it); those will be heard by the Federal Labor Relations Authority and a final ruling could take several months to receive.

Management disciplines workers for not putting forth 'an honest effort' in Ft. Lauderdale TSC

Management at the Fort Lauderdale, Florida, teleservice center has been reprimanding and suspending TSRs if they don't spend at least six-and-a half hours a day on the phone – and Union officials say many of those targeted employees are disabled.

"I know of one gentleman who has cerebral palsy," says Avon Sansone, the Executive Vice President of AFGE Local 2014. "He can't always hold his head up, he can only type with three fingers, his speech is slightly impaired, and he needs a wheelchair. But he's given 27 good years to this agency and now management has decided to go after him."

The manager of the Fort Lauderdale TSC is Mark Spicker; his immediate supervisor is Dianne Washington, who also oversees teleservice centers in Birmingham, Alabama and Tampa.

Sansone pointed out that Social Security does not have any specific

"goals" for TSRs, but supervisors in Fort Lauderdale have gotten around that issue by disciplining employees for "failure to put forth an honest effort" if they're not on the phone at least six-and-a half hours.

"People are going ballistic over this," Sansone said. "This whole thing indicates the employees are not honest people or they don't have any integrity, but that's not true..."

"Sometimes the computer doesn't work or you have to ask a question of the TE (Technical Expert). Those things reduce our phone time but supervisors don't take them into consideration."

Grievances have been filed over the reprimands and suspensions but management has denied them all. Janet Winghart, the President of Local 2014, says the Union will take these cases to arbitration if the agency doesn't reverse its earlier decisions.

She also believes more employ-

ees (including those not disabled) will be targeted in the future.

"If management can terrorize employees into giving-up their breaks and lunch so they can get to seven or seven-and-a half hours of phone time, they'll do it," Winghart told UNITY.

She said another problem in Fort Lauderdale is that some members of the bargaining unit are accused of being AWOL (absent without leave) if they call in sick and other employees are already taking the day off.

"People get sick. It happens, and most of these TSRs have enough leave, but management will try to discipline them anyway."

Employees in the Ft. Lauderdale TSC were also recently notified by e-mail that if management perceives them as being late when returning from their breaks or lunch, they will be charged AWOL. Union officials will be handling that matter as well.

Union still fighting for long-time member

Susan Conrad's friends and supporters have certainly *not* forgotten her.

Conrad was fired in mid-December after nearly 32 years of service to Social Security; her story was profiled in the January UNITY. She had been an SSI Claims Representative in the Somerville, Mass. District Office and from May, 1991, to August, 2005, she was a full-time Union official.

Conrad continued to represent employees while she was a CR. Even after being forced out of the agency, she is still Executive Vice President of AFGE Local 1164 in Boston.

Many people believe her outspoken support for employees and the Union led the agency to hit her with a number of suspensions, reprimands, and AWOL charges. She was also put on a Performance Assistance (PA) plan, as well as an OPS (Opportunity to Perform Successfully) before she was terminated.

Witold Skwierczynski, the President of Council 220, has written to SSA Commissioner Michael Astrue about the

situation:

"I am very disturbed by the anti-Union conduct displayed by Boston region management officials under the supervision of Regional Commissioner Manny Vaz... (They have) been embarrassed by Ms. Conrad's successful advocacy of employee rights. I am convinced that her termination has nothing to do with her job performance but everything to do with her Union activities."

It's unlikely that Astrue will get personally involved in the matter. He has previously told the Union that he wants the "career staff" to handle day-to-day matters within the agency, no matter how important they are.

AFGE is fighting Conrad's termination and her representative is Kirk Bigelow. He also believes that she was targeted by management and he recently asked other Unionists to "put ourselves in Susan's shoes and realize that if they can shaft someone with her length of service, then this cut-throat agency can shaft us next."

Managers candid about staffing, future

(This is the first of a three-part series--Editor)

“Staff morale has tanked (including mine). I am going to retire in 9 months and cannot tell you how eager I am to tell this agency to “kiss my...” after 35 years.”

That was just one of many comments recently offered by management officials throughout the country as they provided feedback to the National Council of Social Security Management Associations (NCSSMA).

Their statements covered 84 pages (single spaced) and the document was provided to **UNITY** by a confidential source. The entire report can be accessed on the Council 220 web site:

www.afgec220.org

Cuts in staffing were seen as a major problem, but it was also recognized that field offices and tele-

service centers would not receive a large influx of new employees.

One of the most startling admissions came from a District Manager who stated that “we had two new hires requiring mentoring for at least ½ the day for two journeymen CRs. It is amazing that the SSI workload moved at all, and was a testimony to the skill and dedication of the two left to mentor. Under the PACS they would be only a level 3, but in reality they should be a 5 but we can’t award a 5 overall, at least not in this region.”

Union officials see that statement as proof of an organized ef-



fort on the part of high-ranking SSA executives to deny bargaining unit employees the recognition and award money they deserve.

Employee “burnout” was another issue addressed in the document:

“Over one-half of my staff (has) developed personal health problems in the past year, both physical and mental. I believe workplace stress is a major factor,” wrote one District Manager.

There was also this acknowledgement:

“Many of the staff on board in this office are reporting sleepless nights and the tension in the office is felt at all levels. If the strain goes much further we will face the loss of individuals, not near retirement age, that previously planned on making SSA a lifelong career.”

An Operations Supervisor offered this assessment:

“Our staff is being pushed harder and harder each day. As a supervisor I’m stuck in the middle. I feel the people I supervise are working as best they can. For the first time in 35 years I truly do not like my job... Is morale good? Absolutely not, not even mine.”

Another OS wrote:

“Now that we have overtime, we are offering it every weekend to help with our backlogs. However, I have never felt that overtime is the answer. Overtime allows our overworked staff to work even more. The result is more people calling in sick during the work week.”

The second part of this series will be presented in the next **UNITY**. It will detail management complaints with their Area Directors, Regional Offices, and Central Office.

Employee stunned by manager’s highly insensitive comment

“I would rather feel compassion than know the meaning of it.”

St. Thomas Aquinas

A Social Security manager in California should receive sensitivity training after making a comment that can only be described as harsh and unkind.

A long-time member of the bargaining unit (who asked not to be identified) was told that her father-in-law had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. The employee knew she had to tell her husband and that he would be devastated by the announcement.

“I called the office and talked to my manager,” the employee said. “I

wanted her to know that I would probably miss work the next day and that’s when she told me, ‘well, I know you have to tell your husband, but *we really need you at work.*’

Weeks later, while recounting the incident to **UNITY**, the employee was still shocked.

“I was hurt because it was insensitive of her. I wasn’t asking for a whole week off, just one piddly day.”

Ironically – just as this was happening – the manager was also having to deal with a relative who’d been diagnosed with cancer.

EVENT ID	TIME OF INCIDENT	TIME LOGGED	DISPATCHER	HOW RECEIVED	INCIDENT
07020162	08/09/2007 08:30	08/09/2007 09:32	[REDACTED]	OT	GA2153ZZ Social Security Admin 6452 Lee Street Morrow, GA 30260 <i>blotnc</i> 0830: Received a tx from Contract Guard requesting FPS response to location. 0830: FPO [REDACTED] and FPO [REDACTED] are responding to location. 0846: FPO [REDACTED] advised they are on site. 0850: FPO [REDACTED] requested information on two subjects. First subject is [REDACTED] B [REDACTED] Second is [REDACTED] DOB [REDACTED] Both subjects were ran though JUST. Subjects came back negative NCIC, information was given to FPO [REDACTED] via radio. 0920: FPO [REDACTED] is clear. Status: Closed.
[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]

Need information? Uncle Sam isn't much help

Last September, UNITY submitted a Freedom of Information Act request to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) about an incident which had occurred at the Social Security office in Morrow, Georgia. The manager, Mary Moore, had two Union reps thrown out of the building and we wanted more details about the incident. We wrote to DHS because two of its personnel were dispatched to the office. Four months after our original inquiry -- and following several phone calls and one fax -- we received information from the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency. It is being re-printed (upper left) just as it was sent to us, and as you can see, the term "freedom of information" has apparently taken on new meaning.

Union stops field offices' money-making scheme

A plan to charge \$15.00 for each Social Security benefit verification came to an immediate halt recently when Union officials learned about the idea.

A sign had been placed on the front door of the Foothill branch office in Oakland, Calif. It stated the fee would take effect in January, but Health and Safety Representative Howard Egerman saw the notice and reported it to other Union members.

Unfortunately by that time the practice had become widespread and signs had been posted in offices around the entire San Francisco Bay Area.

"The public we serve should not be burdened by having to pay for something like this," believes Katrina Lopez, the President of AFGE Council 147 and one of the people whom Egerman contacted. "If the public was able to pay for these types of things, they would have a job -- but many of our clients are disabled, elderly, or low income and they certainly don't have an extra fifteen dollars."

She also noted that the poor often use benefit verifications to get reduced rent for housing and other programs.

Dana Duggins, the third Vice President of AFGE Council 220, soon learned about the scheme and immediately wrote to SSA Commissioner Michael Astrue.

"Before you knew it, the signs had come down," Duggins said, "but I'd still like to know who put them up in the first place and whether anyone was ever charged. If they were, it was an illegal practice that has to be dealt with and those claimants surely have to be reimbursed."

The agency's own regulations state benefit verifications will be provided free to the public, and Duggins says that raises two other questions.

"If the Union hadn't intervened, how long would management have continued this?" she asked. "And what was the agency going to do with all the money it collected?"

Get Involved!

Tired of being treated like a second-class citizen at work? AFGE is now looking for volunteers to help with a wide array of projects.

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Management turns its back on career employee

Marionetta Merriweather is the type of employee that every manager wants in their office. She has 14 years of federal service. She's never late for work, hasn't had any disciplinary problems, and she's known for her kindness and generosity.

Despite all of those positive attributes, management in the downtown Memphis Social Security office recently denied her a chance to work credit hours.

Merriweather needed the extra hours because she has run out of leave. The reason: she undergoes dialysis on a regular basis, but management wants her to use Leave Without Pay (LWOP) – which would cause a financial hardship.

"There's no reason she should have been denied her request for credit hours on Saturdays when others are working overtime," says Fran Walker, the Executive Vice President of AFGE Local 3438 in Memphis.

A grievance may be filed over the issue if there is no resolution because it is a continuing violation,

but Walker says there are other problems as well:

The manager of the downtown Memphis office (James Alford) took Merriweather's name off the Voluntary Leave Transfer program.

"He said that it was *his* decision, whether she stayed on it or not," Walker told **UNITY**. "No other explanation was provided."

Merriweather asked for "reasonable accommodation" but that request was denied by the agency. She is a Service Rep who wanted to stay away from the front counter because of her weakened immune system and the chance that she would come in contact with someone who has a communicable disease.

"The office is right next to a homeless shelter so we have a lot of people who are sickly," according to Walker. "She submitted all the necessary medical evidence but someone in Central Office turned her down.

"If they (management) really wanted to help her, they could – but they've chosen not to."