

UNITY

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Obama gets Council endorsement

Council 220 has endorsed Senator Barack Obama for President.

Witold Skwierczynski, the Council President, admits it was a “difficult choice” between Obama and his closest Democratic rival, Senator Hillary Clinton.

Council officials said they have

the utmost respect for Sen. Clinton, but that the next administration must be prepared to make the changes to undo the impact of years of budget cuts. The Union notes that the previous Clinton Administration’s budget severely limited the agency’s ability to achieve

its mission, a trend accelerated by the Bush Administration’s agenda to privatize social security.

“In the end, we felt Senator Obama will offer the kind of new leadership necessary to restore the Social Security Administration to a first class agency,” Skwierczynski said.

“Senator Obama has been a friend of labor, displaying a firm understanding of the critical importance of both a healthy labor movement and strong government in America,” he added. “We are confident that as President, he will look closely at SSA’s needs and work to re-establish the necessary relationship between the agency and its bargaining unit employees.”

The Council voted to endorse Obama at its February caucus. The American Federation of Government Employees national organization had not yet endorsed a candidate for President.

Agency has ‘zero-tolerance’ for computer Hatch Act violations

Because 2008 is an election year, Council 220 wants all of its members to be especially careful while on-the-job. **DO NOT** receive, send, reply to, forward, or save e-mail messages which contain partisan political content.

Additional information is available at www.afgec220.org.

Federal employees limited, not silenced in political campaigns

The Social Security Administration is looking for employees suspected of Hatch Act violations.

The Hatch Act defines what federal workers can and cannot do during partisan political campaigns. Employees should be aware that *only* the Office of Special Counsel (OSC) may investigate possible Hatch Act violations and recommend punishment.

The Hatch Act generally permits most federal employees to actively participate in political management and political campaigns, just not while they are at work. Even at work, expressing your opinion in the break room about a candidate is generally protected activity.

In fact, the OSC stated in a May 30, 2002, memo that the Hatch Act “explicitly protects the rights of federal employees to express their opinions on political subjects and candidates both publicly and privately. Thus, the Hatch Act does not prohibit “water-cooler” type discussions and exchanges of opinion among co-workers concerning the events of the day (including political campaigns).”

The agency, however, can still take

action against employees who violate policies regarding computer use.

If a situation arises and management wants to discuss it with you, ask for your Union Representative!

Employees may do the following when off of government property and on their own time:

- register and vote as they choose
- assist in voter registration drives
- contribute money to political organizations
- attend political fundraising functions
- attend and be active at political rallies and meetings
- sign nominating petitions
- campaign for or against candidates in partisan elections
- make campaign speeches for candidates in partisan elections
- distribute campaign literature in partisan elections

For a complete guide to the what is and is not permissible in an election year, go to the Members’ Only section of www.afge.org and search “Hatch Act Guide.”

Management sees furry best friend as 'imminent threat'

Management in the Union City, Tennessee Social Security Office is worried about threats – not from Al Qaeda or the Taliban, but a dog!

Claims Representative Joan Smith was recently approved for five hours of Saturday overtime. Like she's done many times before, she brought her dog Bosco in her truck and she parked where she could see the locked vehicle and the animal from her workstation window.

"My truck was not on federal property," Smith said. "I parked next door at a dentist's office."

A short time later, Operations Supervisor Carey Capps asked Smith if the dog was with her.

"I said yes and he told me that I wasn't supposed to bring the dog to work," Smith told **UNITY**. "I asked him if he wanted me to take Bosco home and he said that wasn't necessary."

Later that morning, Smith went on a break and took Bosco a drink of water and some treats. They also went for a walk.

"When I came back, Carey was in the manager's office and they had the door closed," she remembered. "After a few minutes he asked me to go inside the office. That's when I was told to sign out and go home because my dog posed an 'imminent threat' and was a 'threat to the safety' of other employees because he was *too close* to Federal property.

"I asked if I could move my truck and was told, 'no, not today.'"

Smith has filed a grievance over that issue and several others.

"My manager (Ron Smith) has continued to harass me. He's either

delayed or limited the amount of time I can spend with my Union Rep.

"Carey Capps also asked me inappropriate questions about what I was doing on my break, while I was walking Bosco."

Smith remembers a time when the previous manager allowed her dog to lay on a blanket near her desk, inside the office.

She has been the AFGE representative in Union City since 2000.

"In 1999, I was at the top of my career. I taught a new hire T2 CR training class, made the best qualified list for the nationwide Manager Development Program and went to Baltimore for an interview, did most of the speeches for our office, and did a lot of in-office training. But shortly after I became the Union steward, the speeches were taken away and I could not do anything right."

The harassment continues today.

"Mr. Smith (no relation to the employee) is still trying to coerce and intimidate me. He does not be-



WANTED: Bosco
(Considered pawed and dangerous?)

lieve that I know how to do my job. His constant harassment has caused my blood pressure to be near stroke levels at times. I've had to leave work and go directly to my doctor's office for treatment."

UNITY

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Union supports bill to keep FO's open

**By John Oertel
Staff Writer**

“This is one of the best pieces of legislation I have seen in years.”

That quote – from Council 220 President Witold Skwierzynski – underscores the importance of H.R. 5110, the Social Security Customer Service Improvement Act.

Congressman Brian Higgins (D-New York) recently introduced the bill and dozens of other lawmakers quickly signed on as co-sponsors. The measure would prohibit SSA from shutting down or limiting hours at field offices without providing Congress with at least six months notice and “thoughtful justifications for closure.” It would also require the commissioner to submit the agency’s budget directly to Congress rather than going through the president’s Office of Management and Budget.

“The changes in this bill would give Congress the information it needs to help make field offices work better, and to give Social Security beneficiaries the respect and dignity they deserve,” Rep. Higgins said at a recent news conference.

“During this fiscal year, we will be at our lowest staffing level since 1972,” Skwierzynski noted. “It’s no secret that Commissioner Astrue and the Bush Administration are working together to reduce the size of the agency, substitute Internet service for personalized service, shift workloads to third parties, and implement private investment accounts .

“The President’s privatization proposal didn’t work three years ago, but now they’re trying something else: closing as many offices as possible so the public will actually believe that big business can do

the job better than our employees.

“That’s certainly not true, but this administration has less than a year to go and they will try *anything* to advance their cause.”

Skwierzynski also pointed out that the number of field offices shutdown in 2007 reached an all-time high of 17, far exceeding the yearly average since 1980 .

“Linda McMahon, the Deputy Commissioner of Operations, has already told the Union that as many as 200 offices could be closed,” he added. “Since she made that statement, the Agency has tried to deny there’s any such plan. Jim Martin – the Chicago Regional Commissioner – informed the Union that any office with 15 or fewer employees will be looked-at and might be closed as well.”

Skwierzynski recently met with Astrue about a letter sent by Council 220 to every member of Congress; in it, the Union warned of office closures and their effect on public service.

“That meeting lasted about an hour,” Skwierzynski told **UNITY**, “and the Commissioner repeatedly screamed at me. He also called me a ‘liar’ and he referred to our letter as ‘stupid.’ But I can honestly say that I never raised my voice to him because I promised during his confirmation process that I’d do everything possible to maintain a professional relationship with Mr. Astrue .

“Although he may deny it, the fact remains that SSA has significantly accelerated office closures since he became Commissioner and has threatened to shutdown even more in an effort to ‘save money.’

“Office closures appear to have nothing to do with improving public service and everything to do with

eliminating face-to-face service and forcing the public to use the Internet to access Social Security.”

Another Union concern is a recent statement from Senator John McCain that he supports the Bush Administration’s failed privatization policy. McCain, the Republican Party’s Presidential nominee in 2008, has told the Wall Street Journal that “as part of Social Security reform, I believe that private savings accounts are a part of it – along the lines that President Bush proposed.”

Commissioner Astrue has already given \$1000 to the McCain campaign – the maximum legal contribution.

Skwierzynski encourages all SSA employees (bargaining unit and management) to support H.R. 5110.

“They should contact their Congressional representative and ask them to vote for the bill. Of course, employees should only do this on their own time, using their own personal phones. Agency phones and equipment cannot be used for any sort of lobbying.

“However, employees can use their cell phones during lunch and call the U.S. Capital switchboard at 202-224-3121. They should ask for their Congressperson’s office and when they’re connected, urge them to support and co-sponsor HR 5110.”

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For a complete list of office closures and consolidations over the last two years, refer to page 3 of “The Government Standard” (January/February 2008 edition). It is available on-line at www.afge.org.

Boston region fires another Union Rep

Management in the Boston Region seems to be working overtime to get rid of female Union officials.

The latest employee to lose her job is Tawra Lundy, an African-American Claims Representative who worked in the Hartford, Connecticut field office before she was fired earlier this year.

The manager there is Salvatore Anello; her supervisor was Orlando Rosario.

Lundy had eight years of service with Social Security and she had worked in other offices before arriving in Hartford in October, 2004.

"As soon as I got here, the shady stuff started," she told UNITY. "Management was targeting me from the beginning. I can only say it was racial."

Lundy claims that she and another African-American employee were routinely timed while taking their breaks – something that did not happen to others in the same office. An EEO complaint was later filed and "when it went to mediation, management admitted that it had made a mistake," Lundy said.

The agency alleged that she did not successfully complete an Assistance Plan (AP) or the Opportunity to Perform Successfully (OPS), but in a letter to Regional Commissioner Manuel Vaz, the Union called management's plan to put her into those performance plans "highly suspect."

Rich Couture, the President of AFGE Local 1164, pointed out that Lundy went to Title 2 crossover training from November, 2005 to February, 2006 and she was then given all the work of a journey-level employee, instead of a new trainee.

"The Union believes that the Agency's failure to adequately train, mentor, and appraise Ms. Lundy as a trainee ultimately facilitated her removal once she was deemed by management to be a troublemaker in late spring/early summer of 2007," Couture wrote in his letter to the Regional Commissioner.

"Around that time," Couture continued, "Ms. Lundy became very outspoken about management actions and became very involved in the Union as the office steward. The timing of the performance actions, so close to her increase in protected Union activity, is suspect."

Earlier this year, Susan Conrad was

fired after nearly 32 years with Social Security. She had been working in the Somerville, Mass. Office and, like Tawra Lundy, had been very outspoken as a Union official. Conrad was also put on an AP and OPS before she was forced-out.

Both women are now working with AFGE to be reinstated.

SSA card centers bring long lines, frustrating waits for service

Imagine walking into a Social Security Office, waiting two hours to be seen, and then being told, "I can't help you."

Ordinarily that employee would get a lecture, a reprimand, or a suspension – but it's a perfectly acceptable response in Las Vegas, Phoenix, and the New York City metropolitan area. Why? Because each of those places has a "Card Center" that *only* processes requests for new and replacement Social Security cards.

Charlie Estudillo, the Vice President of Council 220, recently visited the center in Las Vegas and was amazed by what he saw and heard.

"I spoke to one man who had been in line since 6 a.m. for his *third* attempt to get his Social Security card," Estudillo said. "Even more astonishing was the fact that there were 160 people behind him and the building was not even open yet."

The Las Vegas site is meant to serve millions of people who reside in six counties.

"If you live in any of those areas, you have to go to a Card Center," Estudillo explained. "You won't be helped in a local field office and

some people have traveled up to 200 miles.

"If a person is elderly and doesn't drive, they have to rely on public transportation. That creates another set of hardships. And do you really want your 75-year-old grandmother standing out in the hot Las Vegas sun for a couple of hours, just to get a Social Security card?"

Agency officials are reportedly planning to open 20 more Card Centers around the United States within the next year.

"That will just create more problems for millions of Americans," Estudillo believes. "Our employees are working as hard as they can. In Las Vegas, they have to do overtime, but these centers are a disservice and should be shutdown."

He also said employees are being forced to work until 7 p.m. and management should have been paying them a ten per cent night differential.

"Once the Union filed a grievance, the agency started paying the card center staff correctly," Estudillo told UNITY.

"Unfortunately some employees still must work at night against their will and at the expense of their families and personal health."

Union wins back pay case for two SRs

Two members of AFGE Local 2014 could receive large amounts of retroactive pay now that an arbitrator has ruled in their favor.

Margaret Laurent and Suzanne Lovelace worked as Service Representatives in the Port St. Lucie, Florida Social Security Office when they were assigned Continuing Disability Reviews (CDRs) and Appeals.

For nearly three years, these employees did that higher grade work but were never given temporary promotions or the pay that went with it. A grievance was filed and arbitrator Barney Spurlock, Jr., recently decided they were entitled to both.

“Ms. Lovelace estimated that she spent between 70 to 90 percent of her time on the higher graded duties, an estimate that was not refuted by any evidence introduced by the agency,” Spurlock wrote.

He also made this observation:

“Under cross-examination, the present and former District Managers separately reviewed each of the fifteen published principal duties of the Claims Representative. They agreed that at least six of those listed were fully performed by the Grievants (Lovelace and Laurent) and three others

were partially performed.”

During the arbitration hearing, management also argued that the Union did not pursue its case in a timely manner and that the grievance was not subject to arbitration because it was a classification issue. The arbitrator ruled against management on both matters.

“I am really ecstatic over this decision,” said Janet Winghart, President of Local 2014. “If the management staff of the Port St. Lucie office had adhered to the contract, Margaret and Suzanne would have been properly compensated much earlier for the higher graded duties that had been assigned to them.”

She also described the behavior of the agency’s chief negotiator, Ralph Patinella, as “disturbing and very unprofessional.” That sentiment was shared by Kirk Bigelow, who represented Laurent and Lovelace at their arbitration.

“Patinella tried to get the Union to remove me from handling this case,” Bigelow said, “but AFGE rebuffed his efforts and prevailed here. These two employees completely won their three-year temporary promotions case.”

Since filing their grievances, Laurent retired and Lovelace was promoted to Claims Representative.

New employee resigns after just 5 months: 'I was even harassed in the restroom'

Even with unemployment rising, the economy heading into a recession, and higher prices for gasoline and food, a Social Security employee in California recently quit after just five months on the job.

She cited management harassment in her letter of resignation.

“This is an environment where there is nothing done without someone over the shoulder watching, waiting to disapprove and then attack me or the work I was learning to do,” she wrote.

The former employee then went on to apologize “for turning on the fax machine one morning before the rest of the people arrived to work early on in my initial training. I wasn’t aware there was a policy in place that only “Managers” were capable of turning on an “on/off” switch on a facsimile machine.

Yeah, how ridiculous is that?”

Dana Duggins, the Third Vice President of Council 220, thinks management officials throughout the agency can learn from this woman’s experience:

“It’s one thing to motivate employees to work hard and do a good job,” Duggins said, “but when you berate your staff over stupid things like who gets to turn on the fax machine, most people aren’t going to stand for it. That’s the situation a lot of offices and teleservice centers have gotten themselves into.”

The former employee also mentioned the panic attacks, depression, and stress she endured while working for Social Security – conditions she had never experienced before. She was especially worried about her future at SSA if she stayed.

“What will happen next,” she

asked in her letter, “or who will be waiting in the wings watching my every move in the work area and even as far as the women’s restroom. Yes, I was even harassed in the restroom. These instances demonstrate why I feel intimidated, sick and anxious when I get up every weekday to come to work here.”

She also compared the environment at Social Security to the notorious work camps used by the Russians and Germans during World War II.

“I feel as though I was one who was wrongly treated, under constant watch, criticism and intimidated by others,” she wrote. “I truly hoped to have a career in helping other Americans through the SSA; unfortunately this hope has been dashed and (is) no longer a goal or career I want to pursue.”

SSA managers not happy with bureaucracy

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

“Some performance measures have been tightened by GS-13s in the ADO (Area Directors Office). I guess they are trying to make a name for themselves. Of all the offices in our area, the ADO is the only office that replaces staff and they grab the staff from the field offices. The field offices, of course, cannot replace lost staff.”

That candid assessment came from an unidentified District Manager who recently provided feedback to the National Council of Social Security Management Associations (NCSSMA). Complaints about Area Directors, Regional Offices (RO) and Central Office (CO) were common throughout the 84-page document, which was leaked to UNITY. It can be accessed on the Council 220 website (www.afgec220.org).

The manager quoted above also offered this insight:

“Believe it or not, the ADO sent out an email the week between Christmas and New Year’s chastising offices for not having 100% of their SSI folder shipment lists worked.”

Nearly every management official who offered feedback complained about the dwindling number of employees they have in their offices, and none of them apparently believe help is on the way.

“We keep hearing from those in higher positions of authority they know we are understaffed and adjustments to workloads will be made,” wrote another District Manager. “We have yet to see any adjustments to workloads and in fact, our AO (Area Office) continues to push work and goals that are more aggressive than the national goals. If we suffer a loss in the

field we cannot replace that employee. Lose a position in the ADO and it is filled immediately (from a field office).”

There was also this observation:

“The common theme I get is that they (employees) see or feel that Central Office is out of touch with reality, wildly unrealistic in the belief (that) internet and eServices is our salvation, and (it) frankly does not care if the public is very angry over the waiting times. Many of my staff feels that Central Office wants the field offices to wither on the vine and eventually close.”

One District Manager did acknowledge that morale among his employees is good.

“However, it probably is not as good as it is (in) the RO where there seems to be an endless series of job upgrades and all vacancies are filled ASAP – usually at the expense of Operations components.”

An Assistant District Manager offered this opinion:

“The lack of empathy from RO is frustrating... We are being bombarded with more and more reports requiring immediate action on workloads that are not critical.”

In the next **UNITY**, we’ll examine management concerns about an aging workforce, the new performance appraisal system, and their own plans for retirement.

“I realize my office is blessed. We have enough well trained and experienced people to do the work,” wrote one District Manager, who then made this prediction:

“Eighteen months from now we will be in the toilet.”

FERS retirees would get unused leave

A bill recently introduced in the House of Representatives would pay FERS employees a portion of their unused sick leave when they retire.

The measure was sponsored by Congressman Jim Moran (D-Virginia), who pointed to a recent survey which showed that 85% of the federal workforce covered by the Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS) saved as much sick leave as possible.

“On the hand,” Moran stated in a news release, “75% of FERS employees said they would use as much sick leave as possible during their last years.”

Workers who belong to CSRS can convert their unused sick leave into credits when they retire and

increase their monthly pensions. FERS does not have that type of benefit.

“Our current use-it or lose-it system hurts productivity and increases training costs,” Moran believes. A study by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) estimates the total cost to taxpayers at \$68 million a year.

Under the Moran proposal, FERS employees could receive a lump sum payout up to \$10,000, depending on the amount of unused sick leave saved at retirement. The first 500 hours would not be counted.

“That threshold provides employees an incentive to accrue at least 500 hours or roughly three months of sick leave, in case of long-term illness or disability,” he said.

High ranking officials still receiving big bonuses

UNITY submitted its Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request on August 30, 2007. Several months later – following numerous phone calls and e-mails – a reply was received. Many of the officials listed here may have been given more large bonuses since this article went to press.

2005

Mary E. Glenn-Croft	\$22,000
William E. Gray	22,000
Thomas W. Crawley	18,000
Stephen C. Goss	22,000
Reginald F. Wells	22,000
Dean S. Landis	924

2006 (beginning of the year)

Reginald F. Wells	22,000
Stephen C. Goss	24,000
Thomas W. Crawley	22,000
William E. Gray	24,000
Mary E. Glenn-Croft	22,000
Dean L. Landis	780

2006 (end of the year)

Thomas W. Crawley	32,404
Reginald F. Wells	33,040
Stephen C. Goss	25,000
William E. Gray	25,000
Mary E. Glenn-Croft	24,000

2007

Mary E. Glenn-Croft	33,600
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Mary Glenn-Croft, the Deputy Commissioner of Budget, Finance and Management for Social Security, has received more than \$100,000 in award money since 2005 – but her situation is not unique.

Figures obtained by UNITY through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) show several high-level SSA executives have been given large cash awards over the last three years. In 2006, many of them received significant amounts at both the beginning and end of the year.

“This has got to be very disheartening for members of the bargaining unit,” said Debbie Fredericksen, the Executive Vice President of Council 220. “They work as hard as they can all year and *might* receive something around the holidays. Meanwhile, members of management are literally getting rich.”

Other Deputy Commissioners who have benefited from multiple awards since 2005 are: Reginald Wells (Human Resources); William Gray (Systems); Stephen C. Goss (Chief Actuary); and, Thomas W. Crawley (General Counsel).

When UNITY submitted its FOIA request, Dean Landis was listed as the Chief Strategic Officer on Social Security’s website. He is no longer in that position, and Landis received much less than other career bureaucrats (see the accompanying chart).

“I want every bargaining unit employee to know something, whether they’re in the Union or not,” Fredericksen said. “We are bringing this information to Congress’ attention and I honestly believe the situation must change. It has to.

“This agency cannot continue to treat its employees like second class.”

Did you miss your March UNITY?

We put the March 2008 issue of the UNITY on the Council 220 web site, in *THE LIBRARY*.

Look for the UNITY, help with PACS, the contract. . .

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Inside:

<i>Wilkes-Barre problems</i>	<i>pg 1</i>
<i>Bosco is 'imminent threat'</i>	<i>pg 2</i>
<i>HR 5110 may save offices</i>	<i>pg 3</i>
<i>Boston Region fires rep</i>	<i>pg 4</i>
<i>Back pay case won for SRs</i>	<i>pg 5</i>
<i>Managers not happy either</i>	<i>pg 6</i>
<i>Officials rake in big bucks</i>	<i>pg 7</i>

Study claims employees like the new PACS

"It's ridiculous."

That's how Paul Demler, the President of AFGE Local 3342, describes a new study which examined the effects of the Performance Assessment and Communication Systems (PACS).

The report claims it will have a "positive impact" on employees and the amount of work they do.

"Employees are embracing the change from the Pass/Fail system because they will now have open communication with management about their position within the agency," the study concluded.

Demler is less than optimistic on that point.

"Through my experience there has been very, very limited communication between managers and members of the bargaining unit," Demler said. "In fact, the agency has refused to objectively communicate its performance standards -- especially those that address outstanding performance, a level at which many employees already see themselves or wish to achieve."

The study was written by Michael Adams and Gbolahan Osho from Texas Southern University and some Union officials believe SSA executives will use these results during the next round of contract negotiations to

apparently show how successful PACS has become.

It's unknown who commissioned the study or how much it cost.

Only ten "non-management" personnel from one location were surveyed, but none of them were publicly identified and their job titles were not disclosed. Most agreed that PACS will improve production and also build teamwork and staff morale.

"Asking ten employees their opinions, from among tens of thousands nationwide, is kind of a shortsighted study," Demler believes. "It also doesn't take into account all the variables that affect productivity -- priorities, staffing and those kinds of things."

Some SSA managers have also expressed their concerns about the new appraisal system. In feedback provided to the National Council of Social Security Management Associations (NCSSMA), one official wrote:

"PACS has caused a lot of problems. You have CRs/TEs with over 25 years of experience and most of them we had to rate with all 3s. Many of them felt insulted by these marks..."

UNITY will print more managers' comments about PACS in a future edition.