



Grass Roots Report

Witold Skwierczynski, President

January 2008/Vol 1, No. 1

Restoring staff and funding top union's legislative agenda

Witold Skwierczynski will get a lot of exercise next month as he walks the halls of Congress and advocates on behalf of Social Security employees.

Skwierczynski, President of Council 220, will emphasize to a number of key committees that SSA's under-funded budget continues to have an effect on public service and morale.

"For the last several years, Congress has appropriated less than what the President has wanted," he said. "This year, we also have a hiring freeze. In 2006, we were threatened with a furlough. Staffs are shrinking, but there are increased workloads. This puts more stress and pressure on the people who are left to complete their assignments in an unreasonable amount of time."

Skwierczynski also noted that due to personnel cuts, some managers harass staff about taking leave.

"We're being told that some members of the bargaining unit can't get time off to see their doctors or keep medical appointments," he said.

Another problem that Skwierczynski will address is office closures.

"The Commissioner (Michael Astrue) has decided to shut down even more of them. This reduces the level of service that we provide. It also eliminates the whole option of face-to-face interviews and it creates a hardship for employees who have to re-locate against their will.

"We find some hope in a bill introduced by Congressman Brian Higgins (D-NY). It would prohibit the agency from closing offices or reducing their hours until they've completed several cost-benefits studies and submitting them to Congressional committees for review. This would be a giant step in the right direction."

Skwierczynski will also emphasize to lawmakers and their staffs that high-level executives at Social Security are hoping more "third parties" get involved in the Disability claims taking process.

"A lot of these are private



firms that make money every time one of their clients is approved," Skwierczynski pointed out. "Why should a member of the public have to pay up to \$5300 to a representative when an ex-

perienced Social Security employee can help that person complete the application *for free*?

"Because these 'third parties' have an interest in getting paid, some of them may be inclined to help their clients commit fraud so they'll be allowed."

The agency contends that as more private companies file Disability applications, CRs will be free to do other things. Skwierczynski says that's a fallacy.

"Many of these firms send in large packages full of claims and medical evidence. Then the Claims Rep has to put all of that information into the computer and usually re-contact the claimant because something is missing. Where's the time savings in that?"

INSIDE:

- *Dozens of groups lobby for Social Security*
— Page 2
- *Legislative action needed to save SSA*
— Page 3
- *Facts support our message to Congress*
— Page 4

To contact your Congressman, go to:

<http://www.house.gov/writerep/>

To contact your Senators, go to:

<http://www.senate.gov/> and go to **Find Your Senators** at the top of the web page



Dozens of groups come together and lobby for Social Security

Organizations as diverse as the Gray Panthers, the National Association of Disability Examiners, and United Cerebral Palsy are asking that Social Security receive additional funding during the 2009 fiscal year.

Their request was included in a recent letter to Jim Nussle, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

“In order for SSA to meet its myriad of responsibilities, we estimate that the agency needs a minimum of \$11.0 billion,” the letter stated. “SSA expenditures are rising very rapidly and budgets in recent years have not kept up with the increasing demands for resources.”

It was also pointed out that between 1998 and 2007, Congress appropriated about \$1.3 billion less for the agency’s administrative funding than the Clinton and Bush administrations had requested.

Social Security has lost about 4,000 positions over the last two years and staffing has dropped to its lowest level since 1972.

Steve Kofahl, Regional Vice President of the Seattle region and a member of the Council 220 Executive Committee, isn’t

sure that Social Security will get the \$11 billion that’s being sought, but he thinks there is reason to be optimistic.

“The positive thing is that a lot of groups are involved,” Kofahl said, but he’s quick to add that “Congress has committed itself to a pay-as-you go budget. They have made it very difficult for themselves, and this President has made it clear that he will veto any budget that gives more money to social programs.

“**A**s much as JoAnn Barnhart (the former Commissioner of Social Security) was no friend of AFGE and worked without any Union involvement, at least she went to Congress and asked for additional money.”

Kofahl doesn’t think the current Commissioner, Michael Astrue, or his chief deputy (Linda McMahon) will do the same.

“They are afraid,” Kofahl be-



Michael Astrue

lieves. “When Astrue first came in, it seemed like he would push hard for more funding and people, but now the leash has been shortened on him. I think there’s a greater reluctance – from Astrue on down – to come out and ask for anything more than the

President is willing to grant.”

The letter to OMB also included a number of statistics which may not be well known to SSA staff or the public:

- Social Security employees interview an average of 850,000 people nationwide every week.
 - Field offices receive more than 60 million business-related phone calls every year, but (due to personnel cuts) over half of these callers get a busy signal.
- Since the beginning of Fiscal Year 2000, the number of pending Social Security hearings has increased from 311,000 to a record high of 758,000. More than ten per cent of these (about 84,000) are for veterans.



Legislative action needed to save SSA

**By Dana Duggins
Council 220
First Vice President**

Our nation's capitol will be filled with about 1,200 very important visitors next month.

Representatives from AFGE and a number of other high-profile organizations (including the Veterans Administration, the Bureau of Prisons, and Border Patrol) will be speaking to members of the House and Senate, as well as their staffs, about funding for the next fiscal year (2008-09).

Right now, the situation can only be described as very bad. The Federal Government is spending approximately \$10 billion a month for the war in Iraq. It is the Bush Administration's main priority and obviously that level of funding takes away from needed *domestic* programs.

One example is staffing at Social Security, which is at its lowest levels since the 1970's. We continue to lose bargaining unit employees through retirement and attrition, but at the same time, Congress is demanding more work from field office personnel, tele-service reps, and Payment

Centers. The "breaking point" has already come and gone and that's why effective lobbying is so essential.

Congressmen, Senators, and their staffs know they will hear the truth from Union officials and so-called "regular" employees. Very often, high-ranking SSA executives will be less than forthcoming with lawmakers when discussing problems facing the agency. That's one of the reasons we are going to Capitol Hill in February—to deal with the reality of the situation and not the "make believe" which is often portrayed by management.

Other long-standing issues that will be mentioned include cost-of-living adjustments, bilingual pay, health care, and the

agency's plan to push online services. While it seems like a good idea for Social Security to advocate an expanded role for the internet, the reality is quite different.

How many people can complete a Retirement or Disability claim on their own? How many Americans know the difference between "covered" and "non-covered" earnings? And how many people will disadvantage themselves by choosing the wrong date of entitlement, based on information they got from a friend or neighbor?

It's also worth mentioning that this is a bipartisan effort. Union activists and employees talk to House members and Senators from the two major political parties, as well as independents. This is not a "Democratic thing," as some people have labeled it. In fact, Senator Trent Lott – one of the most conservative members of the Republican Party – was extremely helpful in getting SSA employees paid after Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005. Former Commissioner JoAnn Barnhart was dragging her feet on the issue when AFGE intervened and contacted Senator Lott. One phone call – from Lott to Barnhart – made all the difference to our employees.





Facts support our message to Congress

There is more to lobbying than talking to members of the House and Senate, as well as their staffs. They have to know how the economy is affecting average Americans so they can make changes which benefit all of us, and not just the wealthy.

Below are some important facts and figures which have been accumulated by the AFL-CIO:

- Over the last six years, the United States has lost 1.8 million jobs because of the growing trade deficit with China.
- Since January 2001, the number of manufacturing jobs in this country has declined by 18.3 per cent.
- Between 2000 and 2006, worker productivity rose by a staggering 18 per cent – but at the same time, most weekly earnings (when adjusted for inflation) increased by only one per cent.
- Home foreclosures were expected to reach 3 million by the end of 2007. That’s almost five times the rate of 2004. Between January 2001 and January 2009 (when President Bush was sworn-into office and leaves), it’s expected that 700,000 fewer people will own their homes.

If that information wasn’t staggering enough, here’s more to consider:

- Since 2001, health care premiums have jumped at least 78 per cent (giving families less money to spend on other essentials like food and clothing).
- The number of uninsured Americans (those without health care) has risen to about 47 million. In 2001, that figure was 38.4 million.

- The Congressional Budget Office has reported that real after-tax income for the top one per cent of Americans had increased 176 per cent by 2004. In the year 2000, 8.7 per cent of all families in the United States were classified as “poor.” By 2006, that figure stood at 9.8 per cent.

And in Washington, D.C:

- The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) has repeatedly ruled against workers who want to join a Union. Not surprisingly, many studies have shown that Union members earn more than their non-Union counterparts.
- Paul DeCamp was named head of the U.S. Department of Labor’s Wage and Hour Division. President Bush made the appointment while Congress was not in session. DeCamp formerly worked as an attorney for Wal-Mart, which has a long history of anti-worker activities.



Grass Roots Report is a publication of Council 220, American Federation of Government Employees (AFL-CIO), representing over 25,000 Social Security Employees working in over 1,300 field installations and 35 teleservice centers across the nation, Puerto Rico and Pacific Islands.