

SSA GENERAL COMMITTEE
AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO

Representing over 50,000 SSA employees across the nation, Puerto Rico and Pacific Islands

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October 10, 2008

The Honorable Max Baucus, Chairman
Senate Finance Committee
2019 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20010-6200

Dear Senator Baucus:

I feel compelled to notify you that SSA Commissioner Astrue is refusing to respond to correspondence from AFGE regarding key issues. The most recent example of this lack of responsiveness concerns issues related to the impacts of Hurricanes Gustav and Ike on SSA bargaining unit employees.

Although Commissioner Astrue made a commitment to you during his confirmation hearing to improve communications and work with AFGE, he has not honored this commitment. The relationship with AFGE and SSA management has continued to erode under his leadership. SSA's lack of concern for employees affected by Hurricanes Ike and Gustav are perfect examples of the eroded relationship.

As you may be aware, I have sent letters to Commissioner Astrue, requesting him to take immediate action to

- prevent the communications problems and employee hardships that resulted after Hurricane Katrina; and
- Insure employees would be afforded the benefits and provisions approved by OPM; and
- Inform employees as soon as possible so that they may make informed choices for themselves and their families; and
- Keep AFGE's SSA General Committee informed of all events surrounding the affect of the hurricanes on SSA bargaining unit employees.
- Treat employees consistently and equitably from one region and component to another.

SSA Regional and Central Office Labor Management Relations staff informed the AFGE officials which offices were closed, *only* after SSA employees were notified. The same staff confirmed that decisions regarding Administrative Leave for affected employees and the emergency provisions approved by OPM can only be authorized by Commissioner Astrue.

On Tuesday during a meeting, Commissioner Astrue had his Labor Relations staff inform AFGE of the Commissioner's decision not to implement OPM disaster guidelines. AFGE asked for an explanation or basis for his decision. However, the Labor Relations staff was unwilling to enlighten the Union. To date, neither the Commissioner nor his staff has submitted a written response to my initial letter of September 2, 2008 which was written during an emergency situation. (See attached.)

On September 25, 2008, Commissioner Astrue released a broadcast to all SSA employees with an update about Hurricane Ike and Gustav. In this broadcast he acknowledges that "*our own employees who live and work in the areas touched by the hurricanes who have lost everything.*" He goes on to encourage employees to donate to a hurricane relief fund, and that federal employees affected by the hurricanes may apply for relief funding.

This is unacceptable and insulting. As in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, SSA has provided exemplary service for the public following Hurricanes Ike and Gustav. SSA's employees deserve the same exemplary treatment from their employer. There is absolutely no reason for SSA to deny travel and per diem benefits to employees as recommended by OPM. There is also no reason to deny administrative leave benefits to employees who can't work because they were evacuated from a hurricane site or due to the fact that their homes were damaged and became uninhabitable. AFGE is aware that other Federal Agencies have provided their employees with such benefits.

Therefore Senator Baucus, we ask that you urge Commissioner Astrue to take the following immediate actions:

- Communicate with the AFGE General Committee regarding office closures, office reopenings, damaged offices, and Agency employee benefit decisions.
- Keep all evacuated employees on administrative leave until they are able to return to work at their duty stations.
- Provide evacuated employees with full travel and per diem benefits for themselves and their dependents for the duration of their absence in accordance with OPM guidelines.
- Provide travel and subsistence payments to employees whose homes have been made uninhabitable by the hurricane until the homes are habitable in accordance with OPM guidelines and 5 CFR 550.405.
- SSA will not require or allow employees to work in unsafe and unhealthy environments.
- SSA will not permit employees to work with damaged and/or contaminated files.
- SSA will inform employees of their rights regarding pay, travel and per diem, etc. quickly so that they can make informed choices (e.g., utilizing travel and per diem benefits instead of staying with friends and relatives).
- SSA will assist employees to interact with other Agencies to obtain any benefits that they may be entitled to access. (e.g., FEMA)
- SSA will provide administrative leave fairly and equitably for employees after they return to work to deal with disaster related issues (e.g., insurance, household repairs)
- SSA will only reopen offices after an assessment is made by competent inspectors that the facilities are healthy and safe and that they are equipped with adequate power and water.

On behalf of the hundreds of affected SSA employees and AFGE, I want to thank you in advance for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Witold Skwierzynski

Cc: M. Astrue

J. Gage

AFGE General Committee

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The Honorable Richard Shelby

The Honorable Jeff Sessions

The Honorable Mary Landrieu

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The Honorable Thad Cochran

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The Honorable Kay Bailey Hutchinson

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