

Social Security's 800-Number Service Becomes a Modern Day Sweatshop

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AFGE continues to receive hundreds of complaints from 800-number agents around the country. These employees work in Teleservice Centers (800-number sites), Payment Centers, the Data Operations Center in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania and the Office of Central Operations in Baltimore, Maryland.

An increasing number of agents, mostly TSC employees, complain of working under “sweatshop” conditions. Social Security Administration management has been particularly hard on them, subjecting TSC employees to a hostile work environment and denying them benefits that other Social Security employees have.

Just how bad is it? *You be the judge:*

- An employee was told she would only be given two hours of sick leave, which was enough time to go to the doctor, receive her *chemotherapy*, and then go back to work. Upon her return she spent nearly four hours on the restroom floor throwing up and feeling very sick before a supervisor allowed her to go home.
- An employee was told to obtain a statement from the mortuary that conducted her aunt's funeral. Management wanted “proof” that she attended the viewing and the funeral. The obituary was not enough! Leave abuse has *never* been an issue with this employee.
- An employee's daughter is having brain surgery. The employee's supervisor gave her a three-page list of questions for the child's doctor to answer before leave could be approved. Leave abuse has *never* been an issue with this employee.
- An employee's son dies unexpectedly. The employee requested bereavement leave, but the agency denied time after the funeral due to “workload needs.”
- An employee who has had a long-standing condition that requires frequent use of the bathroom arrived for work at 9:00 am and had to use the restroom immediately. Once she was finished, she signed-in and immediately started working. Later her supervisor proposed to suspend her for “stealing” from the Government (because of the time she spent in the restroom).
- An employee loses her baby and is in the hospital. She requests time off to deal with her loss. After much discouragement by management, she is allowed to take leave but only after providing medical documentation to her supervisor.
- An employee's aunt dies and she is needed by her family to help with the arrangements. Management approves leave for the day she learned of her aunt's death and the day of the funeral. She is required to work during the three days in between.
- Any employee who has a “same day” emergency is subject to many questions before leave is approved. Documentation is required when they return to work. Employees are strongly encouraged to reschedule doctor's appointments and/or have “someone else” take care of childcare emergencies.
- The time employees spend in the restroom is monitored. If an employee needs access to the bathroom throughout the day, medical documentation is needed to prevent charges of AWOL.
- An employee who suffers chronic pain from a broken back is required to submit medical documentation for every use of sick leave.
- An employee who is also a single mother received a call at work that her son was in a car accident and was taken to a hospital emergency room. Her supervisor informed her that her leave could not be approved until she brought back documentation from the hospital.

- An employee who was recently diagnosed with diabetes is required to test her blood sugar at various times throughout the day. Those were her doctor's instructions, but management requires that physician complete a form to justify the use of an onsite health unit when her blood is tested.
- An employee was scheduled to appear in court. In order to approve leave, her supervisor required detailed explanation of why her appearance in court was necessary.

These are just a few examples, but there are other problems as well:

Leave Issues for Employees

- Required to provide documentation for emergency sick and annual leave (even when employees are not on leave restriction). Excessive requests for medical documentation are common.
- Allowed limited amounts of time for doctor appointments and treatments.
- Severe leave restrictions, preventing employees from scheduling more than a few days at a time, making family vacations, holidays, and special events impossible.
- Employees are denied or severely limited leave for emergency childcare, bereavement, and/or caring for sick family members.
- Employees are frequently called at home while on sick leave and asked when they are returning to work.

Service to the Public?

- Required to read lengthy instructions and policies verbatim to the public from a pre-approved manual. If this is not done, the employees are "written up" for poor performance, even if the instructions are wrong.
- Denied or limited time to read updated policies and technical procedures, yet they are held accountable when they don't provide this same information to callers.
- Training is rarely provided.
- Must provide detailed explanations of complex issues to the public in six minutes or less. Otherwise they're accused of "poor performance."
- Time restraints on calls. Excessive monitoring is used to ensure time restraints are followed.

General Working Conditions

- Stagnation in grade and position (i.e., employees cannot get promoted).
- Electronic monitoring of breaks and lunch
- Restrictions to cubicle workstations
- Restrictions on talking to other employees

AFGE urges each Member of Congress to visit the 800-number facility in their district and talk to employees personally about the deplorable working conditions they have to endure.

AFGE STRONGLY urges each Member of Congress to contact the Chairpersons of the House and Senate authorizing committees that handle Social Security matters. They should request hearings to determine the agency's rationale for treating its employees so poorly. These Members include Representatives Michael McNulty and Jim McDermott, as well as Senators Tom Harkin and John Kerry.

TSRs in many areas of the country are actually looking for jobs with other Government agencies and/or the private sector to get away from the stress and working conditions at Social Security. Those positions are not being replaced, leading to a further degradation of public service.

Again, AFGE STRONGLY urges Congress to hold immediate hearings on the working conditions of SSA's 800-number agents. These situations would not be tolerated in the private sector nor would any member of Congress want them for their own family members.