

STATEMENT BY

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BEFORE THE

HOUSE WAYS AND MEANS

SUBCOMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SECURITY

ON

**OVERSIGHT HEARING ON SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION
FIELD OFFICE SERVICE DELIVERY**

Hearing on APRIL 15, 2010

TESTIMONY

Statement of Daniel Woosley, Social Insurance Specialist – Louisville, Kentucky

Chairman Pomeroy, Ranking Member Johnson and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to present this statement regarding service delivery in Social Security Administration (SSA) field offices.

Background and biography

I was hired by the Social Security Administration in August, 1999 and I have held numerous positions since then. I started my career at the Louisville Downtown office as a T2 Claims Representative (CR). I did that work for approximately 1 ½ years and then volunteered to cross over into the Title 16 program (Supplemental Security Income). I later went to the Louisville West office, where I am responsible for working all types of Title XVI and Title II cases.

During these interviews I explain the differences in SSA's many programs, eligibility requirements and payments. I am responsible for investigating, documenting and obtaining evidence that ensures the integrity of the Social Security program. I take all the information gathered about each case and I make decisions based on the facts and decide how to pursue each issue. I analyze this information and apply Social Security law to each case based on the circumstances.

I process claims, provide authorization on post entitlement cases, work diary listings, and overpayments. I make recommendations to the District Manager on ways to improve our office processes and I constantly look for ways to work smarter. I mentor Claims Representative Trainees (CRT's) and advance their knowledge of both programs. I have performed SLC (Site LAN Coordinator) duties and have been the primary SLC in our office.

I am currently the Executive Vice President of AFGE Local 3984 for the State of Kentucky. I have visited and talked to many employees throughout the state and I am confident that today I will be speaking on their behalf as well. I understand that many people may believe that because of my Union affiliation, my

political views must align with a specific party or agenda. However -- contrary to current trends and beliefs, I am a registered Republican.

Education:

I have earned an Associate's degree in Business Management (Summa Cum Laude), Bachelors of Business Management (Magna Cum Laude), and a Masters in Business (Magna Cum Laude). I started my education at the age of twenty-nine and finished my BSBA in a little over 2 ½ years. I was hired by Social Security under the outstanding scholars program; this is for individuals who have a grade point average of 3.5 or higher.

Prior and current experience:

I am prior military (Air Force) and currently work as an adjunct faculty member for a local university; I have been teaching in its Business School since Fall, 2000. Classes I have taught or am currently teaching include: Business Policy, Business Organization and Management, Basic Supervision, Principles of Management, Analysis of Management Systems, Small Business Management and Organizational Behavior. I also teach online classes as well.

During the planning phase for each class, I write curriculum and evaluate the teaching aids and technical guides that are used for the course. I prepare PowerPoint presentations, lectures and any other material or research needed to begin class. During the lecture I evaluate the students' mindsets and understanding of each subject. I give written and oral tests and write and edit my own evaluations of the students.

I provide support to the students as a mentor, counselor and authority figure to further their educational needs.

I am also a Reserve Police Officer for the Sheriff's Department in the county where I reside. I am assigned to the Special Operations Unit (SWAT team). I am on twenty-four hour call and respond to all high-risk situations within the county. I have also trained and advised other teams within the region.

Stress in the Workplace

Working in the Louisville West office is incredibly stressful. I've made statements in the past that I feel *less stress* while working with the SWAT team -- and having weapons pointed at me by perpetrators -- than I do going into the Social Security office every day.

Just the sheer volume of customers walking into the office is overwhelming. From 2006 to 2009 our walk-in traffic increased about 34% while staffing levels remained about the same. From January to December, 2006 we had approximately 32,313 total interviews; that's according to our Visitor Intake Process (VIP). Within the same period during 2009, it was 43,788.

Our office at this time has four T2 CRs, five T16 CRs, and four Service Representatives. This may seem adequate but three of the SRs are trainees and one is on maternity leave. One of the T16 CRs has been deployed and that may happen again later this year. This does not include additional assignments or special projects that others may be doing now.

Stress is at an all-time high in my office due to the volume of work the employees are expected to complete – coupled with the number of visitors we see every day. As CRs attempt to clear and adjudicate claims and other priority items, we are constantly pulled from those duties to take walk-ins interviews or perform SR duties. This happens on a regular basis. There is also *constant pressure* from management to clear certain workloads within a specified number of days, and it doesn't help when management routinely walks by employees' desks, stop, and hover over them while they are working. This does nothing to contribute to office efficiency; in fact, it has the opposite effect because employees feel like they are being spied-on and cannot be trusted to do the work that has been entrusted to them.

My own stress level has reached the point where I am now being treated for hypertension. I was constantly having headaches at work and didn't understand what the problem was, and I had no idea how serious the situation could have become if it wasn't treated. I am exercising more and watching what I eat, but I am 43 years old and have been on medication for the last two years.

Recently the seriousness hit home with a co-worker from the Louisville Downtown office. He suffered a massive stroke and has paralysis on his right side and more than likely will not return to work. He is 40 years old. This is what stress at SSA can do to a person.

IClaims

The internet is a great tool and I currently teach an online class, but I also realize some situations need to be dealt with during face-to-face interviews. I am personally involved with the internet disability claims process and appeals that are submitted online. While some of the appeals process seems to be working, the initial disability part is not. According to a directive from management -- upon receiving a claim sent via the internet, we have five days to import the claim. This does not include any follow-ups or additional work; this is strictly bringing them into our system.

It has been my experience that at least two or three contacts are needed to clear the claim and get it processed. There are always additional questions which must be answered; then I have to wait for necessary forms to be signed and get additional information.

It's extremely important for Members of Congress to know that the vast majority of Retirement claims which are submitted to Social Security from the internet are plagued with errors. At the same time, employees are "under the gun" from management to clear as many of these claims as possible. If that means cutting corners or giving the claims only a cursory view (or none at all), we know the agency's artificial goals have become more important than producing a quality product for the public. Some employees then receive cash awards and other performance bonuses because they have met these goals – even if the public is not receiving all the benefits to which they're entitled.

The same problem exists for Disability claims which are received via the internet. Employees are sending claims to the state Disability Determination Services (DDS) with inadequate or out-of-date information because they are pressured to get those claims out of the office as quickly as possible. The result is that many initial claims are denied and the public is forced to endure a lengthy appeals process. I believe that if Social Security gave its employees enough time

to do an initial claim properly, there would be fewer appeals and the public would get the help it deserves.-

Statistical Manipulation

Another issue that has plagued Social Security is waiting times within field offices. At the direction of management “we are to assume that when someone walks into the office they are here to be waited on.” That translates into anyone walking in has to wait – whether they want to or not. They are not given the opportunity to make an appointment – even though in my office, they could be seen the next day and not have to spend hours in the lobby.

One of the main reasons given by management for this “wait to be seen” policy is for statistical purposes only; if we process a claim the same day a member of the public comes into the office, it makes our overall numbers look better. It has been standard practice to have employees work overtime to take claims when they could have very easily scheduled an appointment.

There are benefits to having a scheduled appointment. For example, claimants are generally more prepared and have the documentation we need (i.e., proof of age, marriage, divorce, citizenship, etc.) They can also provide medical documentation if they’re filing for Disability benefits. Appointments also allow SSA employees to be more productive, as they can structure their days around set interviews.

Social Security also has a large number of “technical denials” (that is, a person is clearly not eligible for a certain benefit but the application is taken anyway and then denied). Management claims this is to protect a member of the public in case future benefits arise. The real purpose, I believe, is to create the illusion that more work is being done and at a faster pace. For example, a technical denial takes one day to process. If another claim took 24 days to process, then the agency can say its processing time has been cut in half. The result is that local managers look good to their superiors and the agency can tell Congress its overall processing time is getting better – even though SSA is just “cooking the books.”

This is a huge waste of resources! Time dedicated to completing applications for the sole purpose of denying them and manipulating statistics is absurd. This time could be much better spent addressing workloads that do not get enough attention (such as Continuing Disability Reviews, overpayments, and redeterminations).

I would also like to mention that each year, redeterminations (RZs) are assigned to field offices and employees are told to get them done as quickly as possible. The reason: to meet another agency goal. However, at the end of the fiscal year, we are told to stop processing those RZs because we have met that goal. We could actually do more of them – but again, we can't go past the arbitrary limit which the agency has imposed. Exceptions can be made, but only at the direction of an Area Director's Office. Redeterminations can save millions of dollars in taxpayer funds and to stop doing them for no meaningful reason is absurd.

Poor Employee Morale

Morale in my office is low and getting worse. Employees are overwhelmed and many feel like they don't matter. They know it's all about the numbers -- not them or public service. Statistics benefit no one but management (because their award money is tied to office performance and meeting self-imposed goals).

Lack of upward mobility is another problem. I have applied for numerous promotions and even though I make the Best Qualified (BQ) list, my career remains stagnant. I have the education to assume more responsibility, I have volunteered for extra assignments, and I have participated in the Opportunity for Excellence Program (OEP, which is for employees interested in upward mobility). I have always produced a high-quality product for the agency and take more than my fair share of interviews. This level of excellence is reflected in my performance appraisals and periodic reviews of my work

The last position I applied for was Technical Expert in Downtown Louisville. I made the BQ list when the announcement first came out, but I wasn't selected and the vacancy was cancelled. After talking to others in the district and doing my own investigation, I found out that management's choice did not make the Best Qualified list. The agency then gave that person a 90-day detail to make

sure they made the list when the vacancy was announced again. That is just what happened and the management favorite was selected. I had no choice but to protect myself and file an EEOC complaint over the issue. This is just one example of many in my career that have taken their toll on me personally and professionally. I have never been in a position where hard work and doing more didn't matter. When I came to SSA, I considered it a career. Now it's become a job, but I'm optimistic my career will someday get back on track.

I have taught many different management classes over the last ten years and a common theme is always present: employees have to feel like they have a voice in their work. That is certainly not the case at Social Security, where doing more with less has become the norm, employees are pushed to meet artificial goals so management officials can receive their yearly bonuses, and morale is at the breaking point. Now is the time for change!

Conclusion

Working at Social Security is like being a firefighter: you are constantly putting out fires (large and small) and going from one assignment to the next. Everything is considered an emergency at that moment, but priorities change as the day goes on. I realize everything can't be a priority – but that is the impression given by SSA management. The result is confusion, and that affects both employees and the public we serve.

The primary message I want to convey to this Committee is that Social Security is in *dire need* of proper staffing and resources to handle the tremendous number of calls, claims and post-entitlement work performed in teleservice centers, Payment Centers, hearings offices, and more than 1,300 field offices.

Although SSA Commissioner Michael Astrue recently announced that he has found resources to hire another 900 employees for the field, it's not enough to meet our needs. Congress should request that he and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) properly assess the actual number of personnel needed to meet our growing workloads. Once that has been established, a proper staffing budget can be submitted to the Office of Management and Budget and Congress.

Congress should also take a very close look at SSA's hiring practices. Merit System Principles and Prohibited Personnel Practices are treated ***as optional and not law***. Cronyism and nepotism are rampant and have replaced the promotion of well-trained and experienced employees. The FCIP program has been the primary hiring mechanism utilized by SSA, which completely ignores Veterans status.

I would like to close with a quote that I live by: "You must never allow your fear to keep you silent or cause you to look away from what is happening to others, especially when they are being treated badly."

Again, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to testify and I am willing to answer any questions.