

## **AFGE COUNCIL 215**

February 2023 Legislative Paper

### **SSA DOES NOTHING TO ADDRESS UNPRECEDENTED ATTRITION CRISIS; PUBLIC SERVICE AND EMPLOYEE MORALE SUFFER**

AFGE Council 215 represents Social Security Administration hearing office and appeals council employees nationwide.

During the two years of SSA's pandemic evacuation, hearing office and appeals council employees demonstrated their commitment to public service by adapting to a rapidly changing work environment. Specifically, our employees proved that the overwhelming majority of their workloads are portable, which allowed the agency to continue to serve the public through telephone and remote video hearings. The decision-writing backlog evaporated.

**However, SSA faces a major attrition crisis never before seen.** Since March 2022, SSA overall lost an average of 1,000 employees per month since re-entry. In FY 2022, the Office of Hearings Operations lost 11 percent of its legal assistants, 13 percent of its IT staff, and about 8 percent of its decision writers.<sup>1</sup> The Agency lacks a coherent strategic human capital plan to combat attrition that considers the hyper-competitive job market. Other agencies and private companies offer better pay, better benefits, better telework/remote work, and more reasonable workloads. SSA admitted in a November 2021 OIG report and in May 2022 congressional testimony that it has retention and recruitment problems. SSA has also noted that it has trouble filling entry-level positions. Flash survey results released by the Administration in 2022 show that SSA employees were the most likely in the Federal Government to seek other employment for better pay and benefits (including better telework), most exhausted by the thought of going to work in the morning, and worst in finding their workloads to be unreasonable. Despite all of this data, **SSA has made no investment to retain its experienced, productive employees, and it has already harmed public service.**

SSA and Congress must act quickly to avoid a staffing crisis in hearings and appeals offices, and the agency at-large. This means better pay, better benefits, better telework and remote work, and better staffing, all to make the Agency more competitive in attracting and retaining talented employees and avoid a brain drain. This will require serious investment.

SSA must guarantee maximize telework and establish a remote work program. SSA is one of the few federal agencies with no remote work program. Hearings and appeals employees are well

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<sup>1</sup> Attrition figures provided by OHO. No information yet regarding the Office of Appellate Operations. An information request filed with SSA's Office of Labor Management and Employee Relations remains outstanding.



situated given the highly portable nature of their workloads. Current tentative levels of telework have not slowed or stopped the continued loss of experienced workers. We need a firm guarantee of maximum telework based on portability of workloads and implementation of a remote work program.

SSA also needs to add new benefits, such as student loan reimbursement, that are available to employees at other agencies and companies. The federal student loan reimbursement program is a great tool, as many SSA workers carry qualifying federal student loan debt and the program requires employees to stay with the agency for at least 3 years. SSA agreed to increase transit and other transportation benefits, but reneged, which has led the Union to file unfair labor practice charges to seek enforcement of SSA's deals.

SSA needs to finish its work on upgrading legal assistant positions (which remains in limbo due to arcane classification rules), and pivot to upgrading other hearings and appeals positions, such as our IT staff. Our employees have shown that their current workloads merit higher pay grades, and that similar positions performing similar work in other agencies are classified at higher pay grades. This makes no sense. OHO and OAO are losing employees regularly to other agencies and other companies where the pay and benefits are better, and the workloads are more reasonable.

SSA's apparent strategy of only hiring new workers with no experience in SSA's highly technical programs is only making the problem worse. It takes months to train and mentor new hires, and years for employees to become fully proficient at these jobs. New hires require experienced employees for their training and mentoring, which takes those employees off of production, which hampers service delivery. Further, because SSA's pay and benefits are uncompetitive, SSA does not receive the number and quality of applicants it used to to fill these new jobs. Thus, bolstering retention is key to improving recruitment.

If SSA does not take prompt action to address the attrition crisis at OHO, OAO, and agencywide, public service will continue to deteriorate as more experienced employees leave for other jobs or retire. We will face another hearings backlog if we do not hold onto our experienced, productive employees through better pay and benefits. Failure to invest in our experienced workers will ultimately hurt the public we serve.

Thank you for your consideration on these matters.

Sincerely,

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