AFGE GENERAL COMMITTEE

Congress Needs to Increase SSA's Administrative Budget (LAE)

The Social Security Administration (SSA) was once one of the best federal agencies to work at and recognized for providing good public service. But after years of underfunding and hostility towards its workers, things have changed. Service levels have deteriorated and 53% of the workforce is contemplating leaving the Agency in the next year according to a union membership survey.

What happened?

Over the past decade, Congress has cut SSA's funding. The results have been catastrophic. In FY 2010 Congress funded 66,989 full time equivalent employees (FTE) and 70,131 work years (WY). The difference between FTE and WY is overtime. In FY 2022 it only funded 58,201 FTE and 59,169 WY.

In the state Disability Determination Service (DDS) work years were cut from 15,985 in FY 2010 to 13,581 WY in FY 2022. In Operations (the component that provides direct service to the public and processes and adjudicates claims) staffing fell from 48,450 FTE to 42,166 during this 12-year period.

Since 2010 Social Security Beneficiaries have increased by 25%.

Congressional underfunding of SSA, while workloads are increasing, is creating significant delays in public service delivery:

- Disability claims processing time has increased from 79 days (2.6 months) in FY 2019 to 214 (7.1months) days in FY 2022.
- Average wait times for calls to the 800# have increased from 20 minutes in FY 2019 to 33 minutes in FY 2022.
- Currently almost 1/2 of the calls to the 800# are unanswered due to a busy signal or because frustrated callers hang up.
- The backlogs of disability claims pending at the DDS are over 1 million. That's 60% more than the 2019 backlog.
- Disability reconsideration processing time has escalated, and the backlogs of these appeals are up by 75% compared to 2019.

- There are 4.2 million backlogged items pending at the Payment Centers.

Employees' work life has deteriorated due to unmanageable workloads, excessive management scrutiny, inflexible leave practices and uncompetitive pay and benefits. **Attrition has become a huge problem both in SSA and the DDS.**

- 25% of DDS Claims Examiners left the state agencies in 2022. This attrition level doubled in 2 years.
- The current attrition rate in SSA reached a record high of 11% in August 2022.
- Overall attrition in FY 22 was 10%, 16% in the Teleservice Centers, and 17% amongst new hires.
- Staffing levels reached a 25-year low at the end of FY 22.

Employee morale has plummeted:

- In 2010 and 2011 SSA ranked 2nd in Best Places to Work among large Federal agencies. Now SSA ranks 17 out of 17 – dead last!
- The union surveyed its employee members:
    - 53% are contemplating leaving the Agency in the next year.
    - 72% complain of micromanagement.
    - 76 % stated that their overwhelmingly large workloads prevented them from performing their jobs to the best of their ability.
    - 58% complained about outdated and inefficient technology.
    - 40% said their initial training was poor and 59% felt their ongoing training was inadequate.
    - 9 out of 10 say they know someone that has left their job due to overwhelming work stress.
    - 8 and a half out of 10 say they know a co-worker that has sought therapy or medication to deal with work stressors.
    - Tragically, 8% say they know a coworker that has committed suicide linked to work-related stress.

While SSA employees have worked hard to serve the public, inadequate budgets are taking their toll. The FY 23 budget that Congress passed of $785 million was barely over the $632 million SSA projected as what was necessary for inflation.

To make a dire situation worse, it can be assumed that the new debt ceiling bill signed by President Biden on June 3rd, restricts SSA funding for FY 24 to FY 23 levels and limits FY 25 spending to a 1% increase from FY 23. According to the SSA, this, "would dramatically undermine our ability to serve the public." If funding decreases continue, SSA may need to:

- Institute a hiring freeze.
- Furlough staff for weeks with the possibility of layoffs – which would result in an increase in wait times than customers experience today.
- Reduce the availability in our local offices – cutting off vital access to face-to-face service delivery.
- Decrease IT services at a time when we need it to help mitigate other cuts such as: office hour reductions, a hiring freeze, and layoffs.

Immediate action is necessary to substantially increase SSA's administrative budget so that the employees can provide the public with the services that they are entitled to and that they paid for.

AFGE proposes for Congressional consideration an appropriation for administrative expenses in SSA for FY 2024 of $17.39 billion:

This budget proposal would be broken down in the same percentages that SSA has proposed for their FY 2023 budget:

- 56% salary and benefits or $9.72 billion (including pay upgrades, student loan reimbursement and childcare subsidies)
- 16% other objects (i.e., rent, equipment, furnishings, security guards, magnetometers/metal detectors, etc.) or $2.77 billion.
- 17% DDS or $2.92 billion.
- 11% IT (technology) or $1.89 billion.

This would restore SSA's WY to 69,430 or near the FY 2010 level of 70,131 WY. This presumes a 4.1% inflation rate. Most SSA field offices are not equipped with magnetometers/metal detectors. Hearings offices have this equipment and a lot less public traffic.

To accomplish this, Congress may need to pass legislation that will ensure SSAs administrative costs, which come from the trust funds and not general revenue, are not subject to appropriation's spending caps.

A budget of this amount will restore the Agency's ability to service the public and should result in upgrading worker morale. Failure to cure the SSA budget shortfall may have disastrous consequences. Seniors, the disabled and survivors deserve better and SSA LAE will still be under 1% of trust fund expenditures.

AFGE SSA General Committee