

Chairman Robert P. Casey Jr. of the Senate Special Committee on Aging
field hearing entitled:

***Securing Social Security:
Accessing Payments and Preserving the Program for Future Generations***

October 16th at 10am at the Phoenixville Senior Center, Phoenixville, PA

U.S. SENATE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING
G31 Dirksen Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, DC 20510 | 202.224.7118

**Verbal Testimony of
Jessica LaPointe
President
American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO (AFGE) Council 220
AFGE General Committee Spokesperson**

Thank Chairman Casey for holding this hearing and inviting me to testify on behalf of 42,000 Social Security workers nationwide.

I want to respectfully submit to you that Social Security is facing a full-blown labor crisis, one that is creating great hardship for the worker and millions of recipients that we have taken an oath to serve.

This untenable situation has been festering for years. In 2010 and 2011 SSA was ranked 2nd in Best Places to Work; Now it is ranked dead last.

Yet, we still maintain 2nd best in public trust.

Entering 2023, SSA was dealing with its lowest staffing levels in 25 years.

Employee turnover is now high in every corner of the agency, but highest amongst our lower graded workers, especially in the Tele Service-Centers where employees start at a salary as low as \$32,000 year and work under extreme managerial pressure to keep pace with the 27 million calls annually coming from the public with a wide range of questions about our complex programs.

In fact, in general, almost 80% of all Social Security workers surveyed by AFGE believe their level of pay does not reflect the importance, complexity, and volume of the work they perform.

Rapidly growing caseloads have led to employee fatigue, burnout, and a snowballing employee retention failure.

In SSAs internet claims taking units, 900 employees are working tirelessly to process over 1 million claims pending for benefits.

The Agency's ability to recruit and train new workers is extremely hampered. Newly hired employees are rushed through the training of our intricate programs and feel unprepared and without adequate support. As a result, new hire attrition was 17% last year.

With 78% of Americans believing Social Security needs more funding to support its operating costs, it is imperative that Congress listen to its constituents and unite behind addressing the root cause of our current situation.

The underfunding of SSAs operating costs, slashing budgets by 17% with inflation over the last decade, has failed to keep up with the rising rate of beneficiaries.

Congress has left this situation unaddressed for far too long as Baby Boomers have been reaching their retirement age at a rate of 10,000 a day since 2011 and will continue to do so until 2030.

PAUSE

I want to tell you about a small Social Security field office, serving three low-income, rural counties, in Pennsylvania.

Due to staffing shortages, this office operates with just three full-time employees doing the job of three different positions at once: the Customer Service Representative, Claims Specialist, and Technical Expert.

These 3 SSA employees serve an average of 700 walk-in visitors a month.

All day long, they grow fatigued addressing growing public frustrations over long wait times for needed services and benefits.

They juggle phone calls, walk-in customers, appointments, internet claims, Social Security card applications, records maintenance tasks, overpayment workloads, benefit reviews, incoming mail, and original proofs of vital records processing.

The back-end processing of claims, including research on how to apply cumbersome rules and regulations happens in-between it all.

Sadly, this Pennsylvania office is not unique. SSA workers in offices across the state and nation are working, often through breaks and lunches, to juggle it all.

SSA employee requests for time off for personal, health, and family needs, reasonable accommodations under the American of Disabilities Act, and union representational needs are routinely denied.

Due to managerial pressures to keep up with public demand:

70% of our members surveyed cite bullying as prevalent in their work environment.

8.5 out of 10 say that they are seeking medical treatment related to workplace stress.

9 out of 10 say they know a coworker that has left their job related to work stress.

and 54% say they are considering leaving their career at SSA within the next year.

The urgency of addressing this dangerous underfunding crisis cannot be overstated.

Congress must prioritize avoiding another government shutdown, and fully fund SSA to protect its workers, working families, and America's most vulnerable citizens.

AFGE is requesting that Congress appropriate \$17.4 Billion to SSAs operating costs to protect worker health and safety, meet public demand, and provide the quality of service the American people deserve.

The time to act is now. Thank you.

Q and A with U.S. Senator Robert P. Casey Jr.

□ Q: Ms. LaPointe, speaking from your experience as an SSA claims specialist, can you tell us what an individual should expect when they walk into an SSA field office for the first time?

If you are a member of the public coming into a Social Security field office, you are inquiring about a service that relates to your basic needs for income security and facing a major life changing event.

Due to this you will most likely have some level of anxiety and frustration because you couldn't get through on the phone and have been forced to wait far too long for answers.

The public customer will be greeted by a well-trained, dedicated, and caring public servant. While the worker will serve the public with efficiency, skill, and compassion, what you won't see is how worker serving you is doing the work of 3, but expected to keep the same pace of service delivery because the dire needs of the public can't wait.

What you won't see are the challenges of the worker who is most likely working through breaks, lunches, heavy scrutiny, leave denials, and pressure to keep up with ever growing caseloads that sit while we triage most of the work week.

You won't see the stress the worker feels day in and day out. Stress that keeps us up at night because every question, and item pending is a human being who is waiting and depending on us to get to their case.

□ Q: Ms. LaPointe, can you highlight some of the major changes that have occurred at SSA over the last 10 years and how that may have impacted beneficiary services?

The staffing levels, quality of training, and customer service deterioration are the biggest changes.

Over the last decade beneficiaries have increased by 25%, staffing has declined by 15%.

Classroom style training has been replaced with self-paced videos which are a disservice to new hires who feel unprepared, unsupported and just quit.

This has all caused significant delays in public service:

- ❖ Since 2018, initial disability claims processing time has increased by 99%. They went from 111 days (3.4 months) in FY 2018 to 221 days (7.2 months) as of July 2023¹.
- ❖ Since 2019, average wait times for calls to be answered on the 800# have increased by 115%. They went from 20 minutes on average in FY 2019 to 43 minutes in June 2023.
- ❖ The disability claims pending at the state-run Disability Determination Services are now over 1 million.²
- ❖ According to AFGE, there are a million internet claims pending for processing in our Workload Support Units.
- ❖ Since 2018, disability reconsideration processing time has increased by 78%. In FY 2018 it took on average 102.7 days compared to 182.7 days in FY 2022.³
- ❖ There are now 4.2 million backlogged items pending at the Payment Centers.⁴

¹ SSA.gov

² <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/after-years-of-budget-cuts-increased-funding-would-help-social-security-administration-restore>

³ https://www.ssa.gov/open/data/disability_reconsideration_average_processing_time.html

⁴ <https://www.ssa.gov/budget/assets/materials/2024/2024BO.pdf>

- ❖ According to employees, it takes a full 60 days to get an appointment with an agent to file for retirement benefits.
- ❖ SSA⁵ anticipates a 475 day (15.5 months) wait time for a disability hearing for the 2023 fiscal year after an average wait time of 333 (11 months) in 2022.
- ❖ A 2020 GAO report shows that about 10,000 Americans a year file for bankruptcy and another 10,000 are now dying while awaiting a determination on their benefits.

A positive change over the last decade and ironically because of the pandemic, is we have increased our virtual service delivery options. This has proven to match the growing needs of the public who no longer want or need to come to the office for in person service.

□ Q: Ms. LaPointe, how would additional investment in SSA operations improve the workplace for SSA employees, as well as benefit delivery for people across the country?

There is more than one way to starve a program:

1. The consistent underfunding that fails to meet public demand.
2. Gutting SSAs budget all at once, like what over 190 House members tried to do in September when they voted to slash SSA by 30%.
3. Then there are the impacts of government shutdowns, furloughs, and the federal pay gap, now at 24%. Workers are forced to abandon their careers to make ends meet.

There is no SSA without the workers.

AFGE is asking for the timely funding and an additional \$2 billion over the President's budget request for FY 24, or a separate funding package of \$10 billion over the next 10 years.

⁵ <https://www.ssa.gov/budget/assets/materials/2024/FY24-JEAC.pdf>

We need to add at least an additional 10,000 workers to meet public demand and upgrade the antiquated and inadequate technology we currently have in place.

This will in turn improve the SSA worker and public customer experience.

□ Q: Ms. LaPointe, how should we be thinking about SSA modernization? How can we make sure SSA is deploying technology in a way that supports benefit delivery on an equitable basis for all beneficiaries?

According to a Google study, 78% of Boomers were online by 2013, they are spending more time on the internet than Millennials. We owe it to them and future generations to modernize our service delivery options.

When we think about modernization, we must think about the socio-economic diversity of the public we serve.

We need to balance modern technology with our customers' needs utilizing things like AI, agency interfaces, and telework as tools for the well-trained federal worker to simply do their job more efficiently, without removing their adjudicative oversight and the human contact element with the public.

To reduce processing time, we need the ability to interface with other government agencies like DHS, IRS, DMV, and Vital Records to eliminate the need for the public to provide physical proofs of vital records documents.

90% of employees surveyed cited they are more productive while teleworking due to the lack of in office distractions.

Studies show telework also saves workers \$6000 a year, agencies \$11,000 a year per worker, reduces the carbon footprint, and allows for the continuity of service delivery in times of emergency office closures.

□ Q: What do you think is the best approach to addressing the issue of solvency?

Once the customer service crisis is fixed through adequate funding the solvency issues will be less of heavy lift.

AFGE recommends the following path forward:

For Congress to:

1. Confirm a permanent Commissioner that has the experience, skills, and demonstrated ability to lead in government and work with stakeholders and the union to solve the internal issues plaguing the retention of its workforce.
2. Fund SSA to meet public demand. No longer force SSA to compete arbitrarily for funding when we are in part funded by FICA and not general taxpayer revenue.

Social Security is a widely popular Federal program, an 88-year success story born out of the Great Depression. The most successful and far-reaching Anti-poverty program in this country's history.

AFGE believes Congress should work together to solve the issue of operational funding and program solvency. We, the workers, and the American people deserve a thriving and well-funded Social Security Administration that works for the American people - again.