

Martin O'Malley

Oversight and Accountability Testimony

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Social Security is a lifeline to 72 million Americans.

50% of American seniors, living alone — millions of people living with disabilities — depend entirely on Social Security to keep them from living in poverty, from dying in poverty.

But after ten years of Congress reducing customer service staffing at Social Security to record lows, the challenge faced by this vitally important Agency is perhaps the most daunting in its 89-year history.

And that's saying a lot.

But the reason for this crisis is not a mystery.

Social Security, today, is struggling to serve more customers than ever with staffing levels which you have reduced to 50 year lows.

This hard but central truth is the underlying *operational* context of everything we will discuss here today.

I do not believe that this was your intention. In fact, Appropriations Chairman Tom Cole — after learning of this reality — told me that it was more a matter of Congressional neglect rather than a matter of Congressional intent...

But this *is* what happens when an agency is forced to serve more and more customers than ever with fewer and fewer staff, year after year, after year.

The American People deserve better...

In fact, they have already paid for better...

I know your offices have received their calls. I know that you have heard their cries.

Some of you will, therefore, be glad to learn that over the last year — notwithstanding the gaping, growing mismatch between growing customers and declining staff — the Agency was led through a series of actions that achieved real, measurable progress on some of its toughest problems:

- We drove down the speed to answer on the 1-800 Number from 42 minutes in November 2023 to under 13 minutes this October 2024.

- We eliminated the clawback cruelty that had us intercept 100% of a beneficiary's monthly check to recoup mistaken overpayments.
- We cleared more disability cases than we received for [27] weeks in a row —the first time that had been achieved in ten years.
- We reduced the backlog of Administrative Law Judge disability hearings *and* their average processing times both to 30-year lows.
- And we drove up overall productivity by 6.2% — the biggest single year increase in ten years.
- To repeat, last year we drove up productivity by 6.2% — the largest single year increase in ten years.

The dramatic turn-around achieved last year is important.

People's lives depend on the operations of this Agency.

But the mismatch between rising customers and reduced staffing is growing. And only Congress can address this problem — not by cutting staffing, not by falsely accusing staff of failing to work hard enough, but by restoring the customer service staffing for which Americans have already paid

In conclusion, the turn-around in customer service — achieved by the hardworking men and women of the Social Security

Administration last year — was an achievement unrivaled by any agency in the federal government in recent years.

But as the number of American beneficiary customers continues to climb, the people of the United States who depend upon Social Security urgently need your help, right now.

I look forward to answering your questions.

[539 words]