



CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

STATEMENT BY

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO

BEFORE THE

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY,
GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS AND THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE
SUBCOMMITTEE**

ON

**“PLEASE LEAVE YOUR MESSAGE AT THE TONE: ADDRESSING POST-
PANDEMICE BACKLOGS AND DELAYS AT FEDERAL AGENCIES”**

June 21, 2023



Chairman Sessions, Ranking Member Mfume and Members of the Subcommittee:

The American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO (AFGE) which represents over 750,000 federal employees at over 70 different agencies thanks you for holding this important hearing to look at post-pandemic backlogs at agencies like the Social Security Administration (SSA).

SSA is in a state of emergency. Over the last decade Social Security beneficiaries have increased by 25% while SSA's operating budgets have decreased by 17% adjusted for inflation and hiring is down by 50%. By the end of FY 2022 SSA staffing levels reached a 25-year low. The latest employee viewpoint survey found SSA to be the worst large agency to work for in the Federal government. Staff attrition is sky-high as workers leave for better jobs at other agencies and in the private sector.

AFGE represents over 42,000 SSA employees nationwide, including in field offices, tele-service centers, and support units. SSA's teleservice workers are expected to answer 29 million calls into the agency's 800 number, with callers expected to have an average wait time of 35 minutes before getting an agent. Due to dropped calls, many callers need to make two or three attempts before they get an agent. SSA's answering system lacks a call back option common in many phone systems today; it lacks even the ability to communicate an expected wait time.

The consequences of the backlog in the disability program are real, causing bankruptcies and possibly increasing the risk of death among an already ill population. The Government Accountability Office found over 10,000 people a year die while waiting for an appeal after initially being denied needed Social Security disability benefits, and another 5,000 a year are forced to file for bankruptcy while waiting for their cases to be resolved.

At the end of 2020, there was a backlog of 975,000 initial disability claims pending cases with an average wait time of 206 days. In April of this year, the backlog exceeded one million cases and continues to grow. SSA anticipates a 475 day wait time for a disability hearing for the 2023 fiscal year after an average wait time of 333 in 2020. During peak months of the backlog, it reached as high as 633 days, or nearly two years.

The root cause of disability backlogs is inadequate staffing. Disability claims are processed by the agency's fifteen Workload Support Units located nationwide. Fewer than 500 SSA staff in these units must handle more than 900,000 pending disability cases. While SSA lacks the workers to process disability cases, it is overstaffed in managers, with 1:5 and 1:6 employee to manager ratios in many field offices around the country.

While SSA's acting commissioner can take several actions to improve the agency that would have a small impact on reducing backlogs, the largest cause of the backlogs at SSA are a decade of Congressional underfunding that has failed to keep up with inflation and the increased public demand for services. Congress should exempt Trust Fund expenditure from being subject to spending caps and increase SSA funding, so the agency is able to serve the American public. Congress should also consider eliminating the Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP) and Government Pension Offset (GPO). A significant number of calls and office visits require SSA

to help retirees shocked and angry to learn their Social Security benefits will be taken away due to these misguided statutory provisions. Fixing this will help millions of retirees and free SSA workers to focus on reducing call, visit and disability decision backlogs.

SSA employees work very hard to serve the American public. According to the Partnership for Public Service, SSA is ranked second overall as the public's most trustworthy Federal agency. SSA employees are vetted with background checks upon entering public service and are fully trained on how to protect the public's Personal Identifiable Information. Some positions require years of training and experience to reach maximum efficiency. Plummeting employee morale and soaring attrition rates will prevent the agency from reducing these backlogs and need to be addressed. We strongly urge Congress to fund SSA at the President's \$15.5 billion request for FY 24, with larger increases in future fiscal years.

Thank you for hosting this subcommittee hearing on backlogs in the federal government, including at the Social Security Administration where the backlogs are having devastating consequences to the American public. We look forward to working with the Committee to ensure SSA can reduce backlogs and better serve the American public.