

PLEASE LEAVE YOUR MESSAGE
AT THE TONE:
ADDRESSING POST-PANDEMIC BACKLOGS
AND DELAYS AT FEDERAL AGENCIES

HEARING

BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS
AND THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT
AND ACCOUNTABILITY
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS

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Wednesday, June 21, 2023

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS
AND THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE

Washington, D.C.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:23 p.m., in room 2154, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Pete Sessions [Chairman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Sessions, Palmer, Higgins, Biggs, Donalds, Timmons, Burchett, Boebert, Fry, Edwards, Burlison, Mfume, Norton, Frost, Casar, Connolly, Stansbury, Robert Garcia of California, Balint, Lee of Pennsylvania, and Crockett.

Also present: Mr. Raskin of Maryland.

Mr. SESSIONS. Good afternoon. The Subcommittee on Government Operations and the Federal Workforce will come to order. And we would welcome everybody to this important hearing.

Without objection, the Chair may declare a recess at any time.

I recognize myself for the purpose of making an opening statement.

Before we go too far, I would like to, if I can, acknowledge that, even in formal settings like this, we recognize that it is important to remember that we are all people and that we have families. And I understand that some of the people who have business today have been visited by some hard luck in their life with a loved one. And I wanted to, without saying anything in particular, to let those know—perhaps many of us, more than one or two, may be affected, but that it is my wishes for them and their family in these coming days that can be difficult to families. So, I want to offer that, and we will just let that ride there. But, when you receive information like this, I feel like it is the right thing to wish everybody the best.

Today's hearing is on customer service issues at selected Federal agencies. The COVID pandemic provided a stress test to Federal agencies in many ways, and earlier this year, we heard in detail how fraud prevention measures failed in COVID release programs. That was a Subcommittee hearing that we did that was a bipartisan basis where we universally heard about the frailties of not only some of government's actions but also the impact that pre-

vented measures from being fully understood and billions of dollars—hundreds of billions of dollars being lost.

But another stress test was the ability to deliver services to the American people. And, as a person who worked in the private sector for a number of years that had a public opening to them, I will tell you I do recognize how difficult it is to not only match manpower with incoming needs of customers, but also to do so in a difficult time.

But, with that said, we are here today to make sure that we have a clear understanding about not just what is behind us but what lies in front of us and the daunting challenge for each of the Members of Congress as we attempt to also do business with the government on behalf of many constituents that we have.

I want to try and be fair, and it would not be fair to look back without the benefit of hindsight of recognizing what our Nation would be through, but today we also all recognize that there is some bit of experience that we have been through that we need to recognize that we must do better. And I know it is impossible and impractical for us to manage every single circumstance that we have ahead of us. Nonetheless, it is our duty and my duty, my duty not just as a Member of Congress but as the Chairman of this Subcommittee, to ask sometimes tough questions to make sure that we get straight answers, to know that we will report back to our constituents but also to work with you on making sure that we move forward better.

First are the backlogs. Are they being retired? Are they behind us? Are they ahead of us? Disruptions, inefficiencies, uncertainty, all these things are questions that will be asked today. But overwhelmingly this Congress has asked—and I believe we did it at the end of last Congress—for you to be prepared with a master plan about how you intend to catch up, what your plan is on moving forward. In some way, we want to ask how that is going. It is not a measuring stick. It is an expectation. It is not a measuring stick that will tell us that we know the problems that you have encountered, but rather how we work together.

As Members of Congress, we hear the frustrations of those unable to access government services, and they have come to rely on the government, and you are a part of the daily life too many times of people who need to do business, need to interact with government, and it needs to be done correctly and on time.

So, on behalf of our constituents, each one of us up here—and there will be others who join us today—we are eager to learn about these things and also about how you as the manager of the business are going to fix them.

The second lens is, are we prepared for the next emergency? And, while COVID, by and large, we had heard about, that something may happen, when it did, it seemingly took us at a disadvantage.

I think being behind is one thing. I think catching up is another, and I think being prepared for what is tomorrow is also important. Perhaps your answers will be better technology. Perhaps your answers will be help with more people. Perhaps your answer will be we have learned a lot, and we will be prepared. But this should be a part of what I hope, today, is that you will be able to talk about.

The processes that are required in work, obviously, are ones that proved most fragile during COVID. We have seen those. We know them. But I would remind you that, in most people's mind, COVID was over 2 years ago.

The Federal Government needs to get back to work. The work rules and regulations that have been the past few years are old and do not meet today's marketplace. And I believe government employees, while they are entitled to their opinions, if they are going to take an honest day's pay, they should work an honest day within the work structure that is best for the American people. It is not just a telework debate. It is the efficiency ratio that the Federal Government needs to demand at a time for all of its employees.

So, we are looking at three agencies today: the National Personnel Records Center, the State Department's Consular Affairs Bureau, and the Social Security Administration. I know that there are different circumstances, and yet there are some common denominators about this, and that is your people do the work. Your people, professionals as government employees, experienced people, determine the success or failure of your department. But the American people expect you, them, and us to make this work.

So, we will enjoy hearing from all three of you. As you may know, I have extended from 5 minutes to 10 minutes for each of you. You do not have to use all 10 minutes, but I do expect you not to run out of time by saying you really want to say something else. We sincerely want to hear from you today. We sincerely want you to admit the things that need to be said, and we will not hold back in understanding that from you, nor your understanding where we are. But I am eager to hear the specifics about the agency plans, and I want to thank each of you for taking time.

And, before we swear you in today, I wish to yield to the distinguished gentleman, the Subcommittee Ranking Member, Mr. Mfume.

The gentleman is recognized.

Mr. MFUME. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the opportunity. I want to thank you for convening this hearing, thank our witnesses who are seated before us and, obviously, the other Members of this Committee who feel very, very deeply about this issue.

I think it is fair to say for all of us that Americans deserve nothing short than top-tier, customer-focused, accessible and efficient services from their government.

Today we convene to discuss a topic that impacts veterans; it impacts grandparents; and all of those who rely on our Federal agencies as a lifeline. And there are quite a few people who rely in that way, and so we owe it to our constituents, to the American public, to keep our commitment to improving government work for the people.

And, when discussing agency backlogs, I think it is pretty important to take note of the timeline leading up to our current crisis.

In 2017, the previous administration implemented a nearly 3-month government-wide hiring freeze. Some agencies maintained that their hiring freeze was substantially longer, such as the State Department, where the freeze lasted for 16 months. The freeze con-

stricted, as we all know, the job market and destroyed employee morale and employee welfare in many respects.

However, since then, we, I think, have been playing a game of catchup, and most agencies have struggled to hire enough staff even in the midst of record low unemployment. The American Federation of Government Employees reports that, in Fiscal Year 2022, the Social Security Administration's workforce was one of the smallest it has been in 25 years. And yet, we know that the number of people on Social Security, people who rely on those benefits to pay for food and to pay for medicine, has increased by more than 10 million people in the past decade. This increase in beneficiaries and a lack of staff has extended wait times to where they unfortunately and regrettably are today.

The Social Security Administration is headquartered in my district in Baltimore County. And, for example, in the state of Maryland, processing times for disability claims increased by roughly 105 percent, and that is in the period from 2019 to 2022, further extending processing times from 106 days to 218 days.

The issues of low staffing and long processing times are shared across almost all customer-service-focused Federal agencies, and I am sure all of you can attest to that.

The passport demand is still at record high, putting significant stress on the agency. Last month, Secretary Blinken testified before the Congress, specifically the Appropriations Committee of the House, noting that the State Department is getting 500,000 applications a week for passports and noting that that is 30 to 40 percent higher than it was last year.

So, these are really alarming statistics, no matter how we look at them, when it gets back to whether or not we are delivering the kind of customer service that we should be. Demand is skyrocketing, and yet staffing and resources remain static. And the most vulnerable communities are the ones that usually are disproportionately affected by these types of issues.

If we look at our veterans, a stifling backlog at the National Archives and Records Administration's National Personnel Records Center says it could be the difference between receiving military benefits and not receiving them at all. It could be the distance or the difference between receiving assistance in a homeless shelter for a vet or living out on the street.

And what really pulls at my heart are the countless constituent stories that, in particular, my district team relays to me each and every week as we go through our weekly staff meetings. There is one case I would like to just quickly call to the attention of those who are here, and we will just, for lack of a better term, say that this is Andrew's story. Andrew has multiple sclerosis. He contacted our office in February 2020—filed his disability claim in 2019, 3 years prior, and received a favorable decision in 2021. And yet the Social Security Administration would not release his benefits. So, my district staff and myself got involved. We were able to work with the agency and to, finally, after all of that time, secure Andrew the benefits that he not only desperately needed but that he was entitled to. But that process extended nearly a year after he had already received a favorable decision from the agency. In the

end, the Social Security Administration provided him with \$86,000 in retroactive benefits that he was owed.

And I would ask, Mr. Chairman, unanimous consent to submit to the record the CBS article that details Andrew's case and further details how we were able to successfully intervene with the Social Security Administration.

Mr. SESSIONS. Without objection, it will be entered in the record.

Mr. MFUME. Thank you.

My office alone—and I am sure every Member up here could give you a set of stories about what they have been receiving on the ground with real people every day who are reaching out. My office alone has closed 544 Social Security Administration cases and 683 passport cases since July of last year, and that demonstrates not just the service, but it demonstrates, I think, a tremendous need on behalf of our constituents for Federal agency service and for the diligence of Federal employees.

One of those employees I have come to appreciate because of the way she has helped intervene in matters like that, and that is Mrs. Lauren Hughes, who serves as a public affairs specialist and is a phenomenal asset to the Social Security Administration and to the congressional offices in that region.

And so, I could go on and on, but suffice it to say that that is why Democrats and Republicans have set aside parties' differences, and did so several years back, to pass the Modernizing Government Technology Act of 2017 to authorize the Technology Modernization Fund and secured nearly \$1 billion in investment into the fund.

But the issues here are more than just funding and more than just staffing. The issue really becomes vision. Do we have the vision as a government to be able to empower all of our agencies to carry out their tasks and their missions with respect to the constituent services and with respect to being able to make sure that what they are set up to deliver they do deliver? I have got a lot of faith in agencies. I do know that sometimes it may be a little unwarranted, particularly if there is an agency that is deliberately not doing what they should. But, by and large, I really believe that we have got to find a way to empower our Federal agencies, to encourage them, to hold them accountable, and then to be able to measure progress at some point in time.

So, Mr. Chairman, there is certainly more work that can be done, and I believe that much of that work will take place in this very Subcommittee. Again, I want to commend you for convening us today. I look forward to hearing the facts, strategizing further action needed at the congressional level and, hopefully, at the end of the day making a real and lasting difference.

I yield back.

Mr. SESSIONS. I appreciate the comments from the distinguished Ranking Member and will tell our guests today that we would like to approach this from this side of the dais in the same way that Mr. Mfume spoke about, and that is from a perspective of we care very much about the agencies and the work that they do, but they have found themselves in the circumstance where people who we represent also need them, and we will work together to get this done.

Thank you very much.

I would like to introduce our three witnesses that have been asked to testify today and thank them all for being here: Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs Rena Bitter; Mr. Scott Levins, Director of the National Personnel Records Center; Mr. Chad Poist, Deputy Commissioner of Social Security for Budget, Finance, and Management.

As I introduce all three of them, I want to thank them for allowing our staff to come onsite and to learn more about their operations to see firsthand about not just the circumstances that might be the things that they deal with but, more importantly, to establish that relationship to where we learn about the Federal employees' jobs and how they help the American people.

Assistant Secretary Rena Bitter. Assistant Secretary Bitter has headed the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs since August 2021, where, among other roles, she oversees the administration of the United States' passport system. She brings decades of diplomatic experience to her role, having previously served in several overseas posts, including the United States Ambassador to Laos. I also had an opportunity, in speaking with her, where I reconnected with one of my friends, two of my friends, who I had been to college with who I knew had a State Department career.

Assistant Secretary Bitter, thank you for expecting me to follow up with them as I know you did, and thank you.

Mr. Scott Levins. Mr. Scott Levins has served as Director of the National Personnel Records Center, a division of the National Archives and Records Administration, since 2011. At NPRC, Mr. Levins oversees the central repository of personnel-related records for both military and civil services of the U.S. Government. Mr. Levins brings over 20 years of service at the National Archives to his role in leading the NPRC.

Mr. Chad Poist. Mr. Chad Poist was named Director, a Deputy Commissioner of the Social Security for Budget, Finance, and Management this past May. Well, welcome to the job. Mr. Poist, congratulations on this new role in this capacity. He serves as the Social Security Administration's Chief Financial Officer and Performance Improvement Officer. Mr. Poist brings decades of experience in government, finance, and management roles and similar roles at Social Security Administration, as well as the United States Department of Commerce and the Department of Defense.

So, thank you very much.

I would now ask that all three of you rise to be sworn in as witnesses.

I would ask that you please raise your right hand.

Do you solemnly swear or affirm that the testimony that you are about to give is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Let the record reflect that all three of our witnesses have answered in the affirmative. And thank you very much.

You may be seated. Thank you very much.

I am going to be calling on you here, but as you know, you will be given the time that we have spoken about. We have a clock system which is easy for you to understand. It is kind of like a traffic light.

And we would move first to the gentlewoman from the State Department for her opening testimony. The gentlewoman is recognized for 10 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE RENA BITTER
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE FOR CONSULAR AFFAIRS
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE**

Ms. BITTER. Thank you so much, Chairman Sessions, Ranking Member Mfume, and other esteemed Members of the Committee. Thank you so much for the opportunity to discuss the work of the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs and to express my appreciation for the support we receive from Members of Congress and staff for our mission.

It is a tremendous honor for me to be here today to represent the work of the 13,000 people in the Bureau of Consular Affairs to the Subcommittee with oversight of the Federal workforce. The public servants of this Bureau serve your constituents 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in 29 passport agencies and centers domestically and 240 embassies and consulates overseas. We are home to nearly one in five Civil Service employees in the State Department, and our geographically diverse Bureau serves U.S. citizen interests and supports the U.S. economy across the United States and around the globe.

Mr. Chairman, 253 constituents across the great state of Texas are employed in passport agencies serving your and my home state. Ranking Member Mfume, last fiscal year alone we issued nearly 415,000 passport books and cards to Marylanders.

The Bureau of Consular Affairs is funded by the fees collected for the services we provide to the traveling public. Though our funding does not come from appropriations, we adhere to the same budgeting and oversight regulations as if it did. That is to say, our revenue stream is treated for all intents and purposes as if it were appropriated. So, while our operations are funded by the significant revenue we generate through our fee-funded passport and visa services, we are very much a part of the State Department and reliant upon its platform.

COVID-19 provided challenges in this arrangement. At the onset of the pandemic, the State Department, including the Bureau of Consular Affairs, was beginning to rebuild from a 16-month hiring freeze that had reduced the size of our public-facing staff across the globe. When the pandemic hit and international travel ground to a halt, it took our passport and visa services and our fees with it. We saw an immediate drop in revenue by 50 percent.

It was thanks to Congress' support and partnership during those very dark days that enabled the Bureau of Consular Affairs to stay afloat. Thanks to stopgap appropriations, we were able to pay our staff and to, again, freeze hiring rather than having to let staff go.

The expanded spending authorities you granted to us during that time also enabled us to be able to use consular revenue more flexibly. It has been the most important factor in our ability to rebuild. Extending those flexible authorities permanently would ensure that we avoid similar fiscal collapse in any future contingency.

That said, despite yours and our best efforts, the pandemic hiring freezes and budget shortfalls left many posts and passport

agencies significantly understaffed. When travel restrictions were lifted in late 2021 and international travel began to resume, our fee revenue rebounded, and we were able, again, thanks to expanded spending authorities, to begin hiring.

At that point, years of hiring freezes had taken a toll on our staffing. Our domestic passport adjudication staff was down 25 percent from where it had been just 4 years earlier, and our overseas visa adjudication staff was equally impacted.

We have been working very hard to make up these deficits. On the passport side, we have increased our staff by 10 percent in the last year, with another 10 percent in the pipeline. Overseas we anticipate most positions will be backfilled by the end of this fiscal year. However, it does take time both to onboard and to train new staff for these national security positions. As a result, our processing times are still longer than we would like.

We are also experiencing unprecedented demand. In Fiscal Year 2022, we issued 22 million U.S. passport books and cards. That was a record. We are on track to surpass that achievement this fiscal year by a projected 15 percent.

We believe these numbers represent a trend and not an anomaly. Today 46 percent of Americans have passports, up from 30 percent in 2008 and up from five percent in 1990.

In our Fiscal Year 2023 operating plan, which was approved yesterday, we asked for an increase in the number of passport specialists, as well as increased investment to modernize our IT. Our Fiscal Year 2024 budget request reflects similar investments in our growth.

With respect to inbound travel to the United States, which supports hundreds of thousands of U.S. jobs in sectors across the country, today more people can travel to the United States than at any time in our history. Since travel restrictions were lifted in 2021, we have streamlined visa processing and dedicated more resources to reducing wait times consistent with national security.

So, while having fewer staff at our overseas posts, our teams are issuing 22 percent more visas now than at the same period during pre-pandemic 2019.

Despite our challenges and thanks to the hard work of our teams in the field and domestically, we are currently issuing more U.S. passports and visas than at any other time in our history. Ultimately, this is great news for the U.S. economy, businesses, family reunifications, and people-to-people ties. We plan to continue our aggressive rebuilding efforts to be able to meet the demand today and into the future while rigorously safeguarding our national security.

We are striving to build a more agile and optimized Bureau of Consular Affairs to be able to serve your constituents. To do so, we are investing in the IT and human resources we need to ensure 21st century Federal customer experience.

For example, new parents overseas can now electronically register the births of their U.S. citizen children. American citizens caught in crisis abroad can use a new online interface to directly communicate with Department officials in life-and-death situations. And, before the end of the year, we anticipate that up to five mil-

lion Americans annually will be able to renew their passports entirely online.

Finally, I would like to say a word about the people of the Bureau of Consular Affairs. I could not be more proud of this team of public servants. We take very seriously our long history of serving our fellow citizens. Diplomats have been protecting the interests of Americans overseas since before our Nation had a Constitution. The people of Consular Affairs worked in person, both domestically and overseas, during the pandemic to continue to serve the public, often at personal peril. Our teams overseas supported the repatriation of 100,000 Americans at the start of the pandemic.

Our passport adjudicators returned to in-person work in June 2020. They did so because the nature of our work is to provide direct services to the traveling public. Often that means the work is extra rewarding. We can issue a visa to a student going to their dream school in the United States or a passport to someone so they can bid farewell to an ailing family member. We can help finalize an adoption for a U.S. family or help an American in crisis overseas.

As the public face of the State Department domestically and of the United States overseas, we are proud of our partnership with Congress, and we are very grateful for its support. Your constituents are our constituents.

As we navigate this current period of high demand, I want to say thank you to all Members and to your constituent services staff. You are invaluable partners in helping us to serve our shared constituents, and we are very grateful to you for your support.

Thank you. And I look forward to our discussion today.

Mr. SESSIONS. Thank you very much.

Mr. Levins, you are recognized for 10 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF SCOTT LEVINS
DIRECTOR
NATIONAL PERSONNEL RECORDS CENTER**

Mr. LEVINS. Good afternoon, Chairman Sessions, Ranking Member Mfume, and Members of the Committee. My name is Scott Levins, and I am the Director of the National Personnel Records Center, a component of the National Archives and Records Administration. Thank you for inviting me to testify about our ongoing efforts to eliminate the backlog of requests for military service records.

The NPRC stores and provides access to more than 2 million cubic feet of records documenting U.S. military service of veterans. It also stores and provides access to more than 2 million cubic feet of civilian personnel records. Our mission is to provide access to these important records to government agencies, military veterans and their families, former civilian Federal employees, and the general public.

We are the physical custodians of over 4 million cubic feet of analog or paper records and the access point for a rapidly growing volume of electronic records. The NPRC employs 824 Federal employees and contractors.

During the first 2 years of the pandemic, NARA significantly curtailed onsite production due to limitations on building occupancy that were imposed to protect staff from the spread of COVID-19.

As a result, NARA accumulated a large backlog of requests. NPRC never closed entirely during the pandemic. Although little was known about the spread of COVID-19, NPRC still maintained limited onsite operations to ensure that we responded to the most urgent requests for records, such as those necessary to support funeral services, emergency healthcare, and homeless veterans seeking shelter. As the country gained a better understanding of COVID-19 protections, NPRC continuously implemented new workplace safety protocols and incrementally increased facility occupancy levels.

Occupancy limitations were ended in March 2022. By then, the total count of unanswered requests for military records was 604,000. Since then, NPRC has added 73 new Federal employees and 60 additional contractors to address the backlog.

NARA used funds generously appropriated by Congress to add these staffing contractors, deploy laptops to staff, modernize our call center, and improve our systems for fulfilling military records requests. NARA is partnering with the Department of Veterans Affairs to digitize military service records to expedite our responses where possible.

As of June 20, 2023, yesterday, the backlog of unanswered requests for military service records is 266,000. It is a little bit different than my written testimony because I submitted the written testimony last week, but updated it yesterday based on the current backlog. We define the backlog as the number of requests received that have not been fulfilled within the 20-workday deadline. Since April 1, 2022, the NPRC has responded to almost 1.8 million requests for military service records, including both new and backlog requests. The NPRC has continued to receive new requests throughout the entire period, and the volume of new requests has increased. Prior to the pandemic, we received approximately 21,000 requests each week. Today we are receiving over 24,000.

The NPRC has already eliminated the backlog of requests for separation documents, the DD forms 214 and equivalent, and returned to its pre-pandemic level of servicing 90 percent of those requests in less than 10 days and 95 percent in less than 20 days. DD-214 requests represent approximately 60 percent of the requests that we receive. It is the record most often needed by veterans and their dependents to prove eligibility for benefits. NPRC prioritizes these requests ahead of other requests for military service records.

Other requests are more complex and often require extensive redaction of third-party personal data, analysis of documents and extraction of verification of information contained therein, or the research of secondary sources. Therefore, these requests take longer to service than requests for a DD-214.

Despite the increase in demand, we have a plan in place to eliminate the entire backlog by December of this calendar year.

NPRC is performing its work today in ways that were unimaginable before the pandemic. NARA has asked a great deal from the NPRC workforce, many of whom are veterans themselves, and they have delivered. Response times on its most frequent and urgent requests have been restored, and unprecedented backlog reductions have been achieved.

Earlier this month, NPRC hosted an onsite congressional open house. More than 50 congressional staff from all over the country traveled to St. Louis to learn about NPRC holdings, observe its work processes firsthand, tour the facility, and meet directly with its workforce. During the event, congressional staff reported significant improvement in responsiveness.

During the pandemic, with each passing week, the center experienced backlog growth. Today, with each passing week, another significant stride is made in the right direction and the backlog is further reduced. However, there remains much to be done. NARA's senior leadership, as well as its workforce, are committed to eliminating the backlog as quickly as possible and providing America's veterans with the service they have earned and deserve.

The newly confirmed Archivist of the United States, Dr. Colleen Shogan, has made this her top priority, receiving a briefing on the backlog within hours of being sworn-in and visiting NPRC in person during her first official travel as Archivist of the United States less than 2 weeks later.

Throughout the pandemic, NARA provided recurring updates to Congress regarding the situation at NPRC. NARA will continue to provide quarterly updates to Congress and looks forward to soon reporting the permanent elimination of the entire backlog and the restoration of prompt service on all types of requests.

We thank the Committee for its interest in this important matter and welcome any suggestions to improve service to America's veterans.

Mr. SESSIONS. Thank you very much.

Also, I would like to express our thanks to your staff for making sure that our investigators were able to come in and see firsthand not only the work that is performed but to make sure that they understood the processes and some of those impediments.

Thank you very much.

Mr. LEVINS. You are welcome.

Mr. SESSIONS. We now move to Mr. Poist. The gentleman is recognized for 10 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF CHAD M. POIST
DEPUTY COMMISSIONER
FOR BUDGET, FINANCE, AND MANAGEMENT
U.S. SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION**

Mr. POIST. Chairman Sessions, Ranking Member Mfume, and Members of the Subcommittee, thanks for inviting me to discuss the status of customer service at the Social Security Administration. I am Chad Poist, the Deputy Commissioner for Budget, Finance, and Management.

Social Security's programs and services touch the lives of nearly every American, and we appreciate your oversight of our important work. I hope to convey four main points.

First, our budget directly determines the quality of customer service the public receives from us.

Second, the challenges we face did not happen overnight, and it will take time to reverse them.

Third, we are working to reduce backlogs and wait times by rebuilding our workforce and modernizing our technology.

Fourth, we are successfully modernizing and expanding our digital services to meet the growing demand for convenient self-service options.

Each day, our dedicated employees serve field office visitors, answer questions by phone, hold hearings, pay benefits, and complete numerous other workloads. Our priority has always been and continues to be providing mission-critical services to the public.

During the pandemic, we made the unprecedented decision to implement maximum telework and close our offices to walk-in visitors, except for limited critical situations by appointment only. This allowed us to keep our employees and the public safe while continuing to deliver critical services. We also greatly expanded our digital and online services, as I will discuss later in this testimony.

We successfully reentered our offices and expanded in-person services in April 2022. However, after the disruption of the pandemic, we continue to face significant challenges in restoring service delivery to the standards the public expects and deserves. This is largely due to our staffing levels.

After years of tight budgets, in Fiscal Year 2022, we dropped to our lowest staffing level in 25 years. Meanwhile, the number of beneficiaries and recipients we serve have increased by over 8 million in the last decade. We simply do not have enough staff to timely serve everyone who needs our help.

The current tight labor market also makes it challenging to retain experienced staff and attract talented new ones. This year we expect to complete around 50,000 more retirement claims than last year, 2 million more Social Security number requests, and almost 130,000 more initial disability claims. We also expect to handle 2 million more phone calls on our national 800 number.

Initial disability claims are our biggest challenge. Over 1 million people are waiting more than 7 months for an initial disability decision, which is far too long. These delays are largely concentrated in the State Disability Determination Services, or DDSs, which make the medical determinations for certain steps of our disability claims.

Wait times increased during the pandemic because the DDSs had less access to recent medical evidence due to reduced doctor visits and a shortage of consultative examination providers. DDSs have also faced record high attrition among their staff and challenges hiring replacement staff.

To increase DDS capacity, we have deployed cadres of technical experts to help work down the backlogs. These cadres are already showing results. So far, this fiscal year, they have completed nearly 20,000 cases. We are also working with DDSs to improve employee recruitment and retention. This includes encouraging states to make DDS pay more competitive and recruiting new consultative examination providers. It will take time, however, to see improvements in our service delivery metrics.

We also face challenges with telephone services on our national 800 number. In spite of these challenges, millions of customers successfully use the 800 number as a primary method of contacting us. Due to our outdated phone technology and understaffed call centers, some callers have experienced busy signals, long waits, and

dropped calls. We are addressing these issues with better technology and increased staffing.

Prior to the pandemic, our outdated phone system was slated for necessary updates that turned transition into a modern platform. The pandemic redirected in-person service to telephone service, so we were forced to develop an interim phone system to answer calls outside of our physical infrastructure. This temporary solution allowed us to serve the public safely and continue our essential customer service, but it did not provide some of our prior critical functions, such as the ability to provide estimated wait times and a call-back feature. We look forward to keeping you updated on our progress and to improve our 800 number.

With the funding we received this year, which we do appreciate, we are beginning to rebuild our workforce. Once new hires are fully trained and gain experience, starting in Fiscal Year 2024, they will help us to reduce backlogs and improve service to the public. For instance, with the Fiscal Year 2024 President's budget, we plan to reduce wait times in the national 800 number from 35 minutes this year, down to 20 minutes in Fiscal Year 2024.

Technology is another important tool to improve customer experience. More and more customers are choosing to use our online services, and we are successfully modernizing and expanding our digital services to meet that demand. This also shortens wait times for those who need or prefer to connect with us in-person or over the phone.

I will highlight just a few of our recent accomplishments with digital and IT modernization. Online My Social Security transactions have grown by about 25 percent each year since 2018. These transactions include tasks like checking the status of an application, getting an estimate of future benefits, and managing the benefits someone already receives.

We also launched our redesigned *ssa.gov* website in December 2022. After incorporating user feedback, many of the most visited pages now have a more user-friendly and test-based approach that provides customers with a clear path to the task they need to accomplish.

We also expanded remote hearing options during the pandemic to hold disability hearings via telephone and video for customers who choose those options. Even post-pandemic, these remote options have proven a strong success with our customers. So far, in Fiscal Year 2023, more than 80 percent of our customers have chosen to participate in their hearings by phone or video.

It is worth noting that, while our online services and technology improvements are important, they do not replace the need for trained staff. Even when a customer chooses to follow an online application, which occurs about 60 percent of the time, we still need employees to process the online application and conduct follow-up interviews.

So, to end where I started, to truly improve customer service, we need sufficient funding sustained over multiple years. The Fiscal Year 2024 President's budget request of \$15.5 billion for administrative expenses will help us restore staffing to process increasing workloads, continue to modernize technology, and reduce backlogs and long waits.

If supported with sustained funding and sufficient staffing, our efforts will put us on the path to significantly improve our essential service delivery to the public in coming years. We are working diligently to improve customer service, but we need your support. We stand ready to work with you.

Again, I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you and look forward to your questions.

Thank you.

Mr. SESSIONS. Thank you very much, Mr. Poist.

We will go to our first Member, and that would be the gentleman from Alabama, Chairman Palmer.

Mr. PALMER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thanks for holding this hearing. I think it is extremely important.

Obviously, all of us in our district offices get a lot of requests for assistance with your various agencies, particularly with Social Security. And, Mr. Poist—is that the correct pronunciation—you mentioned having some staffing issues, and I am just wondering how your staffing issues might be impacting improper payments. This is an area that I have done a lot of work in over the years that I have been here, particularly on this Committee, and found that well over half of the issues with improper payments have to do with antiquated data systems, administrative errors, failure to verify eligibility, things like that, which are a staffing issue. And it could be staff that are not able to process the workload as quick as they need to. It could be people who are not as well trained as they need to be.

Is that an issue? And is that something that you have looked into?

Mr. POIST. We have not seen any noticeable differences in our payment accuracy rates. We rely heavily on data exchanges with other Federal agencies and other entities, so we have not seen any difference in payment accuracy rates.

Mr. PALMER. OK. I will try to go back and look at the GAO report and—if I had thought of that before I came in here, I got that listening to your testimony.

The other thing I wanted to ask is, how is your staffing issues impacting your productivity? Obviously, it is. I mean, you would not have brought it up.

Mr. POIST. So, staffing alone does not affect the productivity. You know, we saw productivity decline quite significantly during the pandemic due to business processes workarounds. But, in the first half of 2023, we have actually seen productivity rebound quite nicely.

Mr. PALMER. So, didn't you mention that you are having some worker shortage issues?

Mr. POIST. Correct.

Mr. PALMER. But your productivity is up even though you do not have an adequate workforce?

Mr. POIST. So, productivity is not up. So, again, there is productivity, and then there is production. Total volume would be production. So, again, productivity itself has many variables that go into it. It could be new business processes implemented. It could be new systems that are implemented. It could be employees in training and then several things like that. You know, productivity is not

where it was pre-pandemic, but it has rebounded in 2023 compared to 2022.

Mr. PALMER. Well, what percentage of your workforce is working remotely?

Mr. POIST. So right now—and so, in our public-facing sites, our field offices, we have almost all of our employees working in the field offices, and they are also almost all eligible for telework.

Mr. PALMER. But that was not my question. What percentage of your employees—and you can break it out by field office, or you can break it out here inside the beltway. What percentage of your workforce has not returned to the office?

Mr. POIST. So, we fully reentered our offices in March 2022.

Mr. PALMER. So, 100 percent of the employees are back in the office?

Mr. POIST. They are also all eligible for telework.

Mr. PALMER. What percentage of your employees are in the office?

Mr. POIST. So, again, we look at it by type of office. So, like, in our field offices, again, 100 percent or almost 100 percent of those employees are working in the office.

Mr. PALMER. What percentage of the employees that are D.C.-based are in the office?

Mr. POIST. So, I would say D.C.-based, which would be mostly like an office-based environment, not our frontline employees, it is a small percentage.

Mr. PALMER. How about you, Mr. Levins? What percentage of your workforce has returned to the office?

Mr. LEVINS. If you drive by our facility, our parking lot is full. That has been the biggest difference in our ability to get our backlog down has been returning people to work. I would estimate 85 percent of our workforce is working onsite. We have three small teams that we transitioned to offsite work during the pandemic, and it is deliberate because what we wanted to do was—we have repurposed the space they occupy in the building to add more employees to address the backlog. Those three small teams are our Data Input Section. So, prior to the pandemic, when a request was received, we would digitize it, and then we would transcribe it into our production system. And we did that work onsite. What we do now is we digitize them in batches, and people working remotely—it is about 20 people—will transcribe those into our system.

Mr. PALMER. So about 20 people are working—

Mr. LEVINS. In that one team.

Mr. PALMER. How about you, Assistant Secretary Bitter?

Ms. BITTER. All of our public services—our passport adjudicators have been back in the office since June 2020.

Mr. PALMER. OK. But overall, in the State Department—one of the things that I am concerned about is—and, Mr. Chairman, we have some information that indicates that a fairly substantial percentage of Federal employees have not returned to the office. That is part of what I am trying to find out.

And, by the way, I think overall your productivity, working with the State Department in particular, has been pretty good. You have been consistent with what is advertised anyway and how long it takes to get things done. We would like to see that timeframe

shortened, and if you need more people, we would like to know that.

So, with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. SESSIONS. I thank the gentleman.

Mr. MFUME. Thank you very much, again, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Bitter, I would like to just go back to the State Department for just a moment.

The Inspector General published, as I think you may be aware, a report in 2021 that found real delays in IT modernization initiatives for passport services. I do not think they were trying to lay blame. They were simply reporting there were serious delays here. Those delays kept staff working essentially in a paper-based environment and an inconvenience in many respects for customers by requiring the submission of paper applications rather than the ability to apply online.

Does that sound correct?

Ms. BITTER. Yes, sir.

Mr. MFUME. OK. So, based on the Inspector General's report, could you tell the Committee what the current status is now of these IT initiatives and how, hopefully, they will improve processing times but, more importantly, customer service?

Ms. BITTER. Yes, sir. Thank you.

Maybe I will start with talking about exactly what you highlighted, which is online passport renewal. The State Department, we see OPR actually, online passport renewals, as the future of our services. We piloted this program to the general public from August to February of this last year. And, during that time period, 565,000 Americans got their passports online efficiently and securely.

We asked everyone to submit a survey once they got their passport back. 12,000 people did, and 99 percent of them said that they were satisfied with the service. It was a pilot. There were pieces of it that we wanted to work on. We took the pilot offline in February, and we anticipate rolling it out more broadly at the end of this year. And, when we do, five million Americans should be able to use that system and apply online to renew their passport from the comfort of their own home in a secure and quick way. So, we are looking forward to that.

Broadly speaking, one of the things when we talk about the consular affairs of the future and the services that we want to be able to provide to people, we look at this in two different ways. One is we want to hire people. We want to make sure that we have enough people in place to do the work, but, you know, we do not want to force people to do overtime. We do not want to surge our way out of backlogs and processing times. We want to be able to invest in our technology so that we can anticipate needs and we can use technology to our advantage to solve problems before they arise.

So, we are grateful for the feedback and the inspection reports that we have gotten on our consular systems. We have taken them very seriously, and we are working closely with our teams to make sure that the recommendations are implemented. And, with respect to passports in particular, online passport renewal is a project that we are very proud of, and we are looking forward to rolling it out.

Mr. MFUME. Thank you very much.

Mr. Poist, I am going to get back over to the Social Security Administration for just a second.

Can you describe to the Committee what you believe to be are the main contributors to the disability claims backlog that exist at Social Security?

Mr. POIST. Sure. So, thank you for that question.

So, we were seeing the pending and the average processing time grow prior to the pandemic in the initial disability claims. So, I would like to call this a bit of a perfect storm that hit us. Right? So, we had a pending that was growing prior to the pandemic. We hit these pandemic challenges that forced us to pull some workloads. We had trouble getting medical records from the medical community. We saw our consultative examinations that—a number of providers kind of fall off. And, at the same time the DDSs in the states were having recruitment and retention challenges. So, we are facing now the third year of historic levels of attrition in these states. In 2021, we saw about 20 percent attrition for the disability examiners. In 2022, we saw that rise to about 25 percent for disability examiners. And here in 2023, we are experiencing right around 20 percent again. So, we have fallen back to that 2021 level. However, historically, we have seen attrition there average between 12 and 15 percent.

So, at the same time, we also implemented a new national case processing system that was going to make us more efficient. So, any time you implement a new system, there is going to be a small learning curve. So, again, it is really just a perfect storm of those recruitment retention challenges, not being able to replace all of those employees due to budget, and then some of those pandemic workarounds.

Mr. MFUME. So, essentially, the difficulty in getting medical records, if I heard you correctly, recruitment and retention issues, attrition, which has continued to go up, is there any contribution to that backlog because of telework practices?

Mr. POIST. I do not believe there is any contribution due to telework.

Mr. MFUME. And has telework assisted in what you are doing, or has it slowed the process?

Mr. POIST. So, telework during the pandemic really allowed us to continue our mission. Without telework, you know, I do not even like to think of what might have happened.

Mr. MFUME. And what about now that the pandemic is over? Is that—would you consider that to be, as these other three areas, a contributor to the backlogs or an asset to doing away with backlogs?

Mr. POIST. I do not really believe it is either an asset or a contributor. In each state—and, again, there is 52 separate DDSs across the country, so each of them have their own telework policies.

Mr. MFUME. Well, I am always reminded, and I remind others, of the last four letters in telework is work. People who are teleworking are, in fact, working. The question becomes, are they being monitored in such a way that their product is productive or even more productive than it had been? But I will leave that up to the agencies. That is just me kind of giving an observation here.

Mr. Chairman, thank you very much. I yield back.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentleman yields back his time.

The distinguished gentleman from Louisiana, Mr. Higgins, is recognized.

Mr. HIGGINS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Poist, is it your testimony that you are saying that telework has not impacted the backlog that Americans are currently experiencing through your perspective in your jurisdictional authority?

Mr. POIST. I do not believe that telework has contributed to our backlog.

Mr. HIGGINS. You do not believe it has?

Mr. POIST. I do not.

Mr. HIGGINS. Well, that is stunning testimony because virtually every American watching has been impacted in some way, in our immediate family or those that we serve in our community and our state. We have been subject to very long wait times that have coincided with COVID when telework largely began. I am not saying it was created at that time, but surely you know what I am referring to, where massive numbers, percentages of our workforce was determined—I disagreed with that determination at the time, and I think history will prove men like me correct, but our Nation most certainly shifted to a large percentage of its workforce being forced to work at home, including this body. It was not nearly as functional in Committee participating remotely as it is when we are here and engaged and in person, involved.

So, are you seriously telling this Committee that you are satisfied with telework as compared to onsite, in-person office work, and a level of performance that you have received from each? Is that what you are saying?

Mr. POIST. So, there are many contributing factors here, and, again, budget and staffing are probably two of the largest ones. I do not believe that telework is the main contributor to any of our service challenges.

Mr. HIGGINS. OK. We are going to agree to disagree because I only have 5 minutes to undo that knot.

Let me ask you, sir, regarding the wait times that we are dealing with, how is it that Social Security can move so fast when the spouse of an elder dies to decrease their benefits, but they have got to wait 250 days for a response on an application, you know, through the very efficient telework force that we have in place? How can it move so fast when someone dies?

Mr. POIST. I mean, I am not an operational expert. I mean, I would have to defer that back to our operations expert.

Mr. HIGGINS. That is just the way it is. And Americans watching know what I am talking about. We have an elder in our family that the spouse dies, it is almost immediate they receive a letter that their benefits are being reduced by a certain amount, and if they dare to have collected for an additional month or so, they get billed for that. The agency seems to work very fast in that case, but across the country, we have waiting times of over 200 days.

Ms. Bitter, I would like to commend some of your workforce, ma'am, in operating under challenging conditions, and I would ask you as well—do you think telework has impacted? But I am going to say that my office's interaction with your office, especially in the

New Orleans office, those guys just bend over backward to help Americans that find themselves in a bind with a passport application, and they seem to work miracles. And I want to extend my gratitude for that.

But the larger picture is that I am concerned about workforce presence in the office, across your jurisdictional authority. Would you address that as compared to telework, ma'am?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you, sir. And thank you for the kind words about our New Orleans Passport Agency. We are very proud of them.

For our public facing staff, over season, in Washington, people have been working throughout the pandemic, the passport adjudicators, since June 2020. Throughout this—I cannot speak to the broader State Department and what folks are doing. I think in our office we see plenty of people around. There are days where some people work from home, but for the most part, certainly—

Mr. HIGGINS. Do you know what the numbers are—

Ms. BITTER. I do not, sir.

Mr. HIGGINS [continuing]. Ma'am, what the percentages are?

Ms. BITTER. We can get back to you.

Mr. HIGGINS. Could you maybe get back with us?

Ms. BITTER. Yes, of course.

Mr. HIGGINS. And I would ask the same of Mr. Levins and Mr. Poist, if you could respond to the Committee, in a given period of time, what the numbers or percentages are for onsite work versus telework.

Mr. Chairman, my time has expired. I yield.

Mr. SESSIONS. Thank you very much. The gentleman yields back his time.

The gentlewoman from Pennsylvania, Ms. Lee, is recognized.

Ms. LEE. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As Members of Congress, we have a duty to ensure that our government is both funded and functional. We need to make sure that everyone can easily renew a passport, access their Social Security benefits, or apply for veteran's benefits. It is our most vulnerable populations, the low income, the people of color, and the elderly, who suffer the most when our agencies cannot do their jobs. But we cannot hamstring those agencies and then cry foul when they do not work.

Republicans have starved these agencies' resources for more than a decade, and the current backlog is turning routine applications into emergencies. One of my constituents is a dental student at the University of Pittsburgh. He planned to go on a dental mission trip to Honduras and lead a team to help the people there. Although he applied well in advance, the backlog meant that my district team had to help him to travel to another state to get a same-day passport at the Buffalo passport office.

With the current backlog, only those who can afford to travel out of state to take a one-day appointment and pay the increased cost can obtain a passport to travel abroad in time. For my district in Pittsburgh, the two closest locations are Buffalo and D.C., a 3-hour and a 4-hour drive, respectively. I am extremely appreciative of my district team's hard work, but situations like this should not be the norm.

Ms. Bitter, are there any plans to expand the number of locations offering same-day services so that people do not have to travel hours away?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you for the question. I appreciate it. We absolutely understand why it is very important to have as many opportunities for people to be able to apply for a passport in person. Across the United States, there are 7,000 acceptance facilities where people can go and apply in person for a passport.

We do a lot of monitoring and data to see exactly whether we are able to meet the needs of people across the United States. Our data shows that 95 percent of our customers reside within 25 miles of an acceptance facility, and that 90 percent of Americans live within a 5-hour drive of a counter, which is where you can get same-day service.

So, it is—what we think we need to do is invest more in ensuring that we have the technology, that our systems are modernized, and that we are able to meet service demands.

That said, with respect to acceptance facilities in particular, we are always looking for more places where we can provide service to people, and we are happy to work with your staff to see if there are more places within your district or close by where we can ensure that people can be seen in person.

Ms. LEE. Thank you. And I hope that that also means a commitment to working more with our district offices to better expedite that process.

Another—turning over, my Republican colleagues seem to conveniently forget that a big part of how we got here were Trump-era policies that decimated the workforce at our agencies.

Last year, Social Security Administration saw its smallest workforce in 25 years, while also increasing the people they serve by more than 10 million in the past decade. A 2018 Trump executive order gutted the collective bargaining power of its workers. Luckily, President Biden has since reversed this policy, but SSA workers are now stuck with the contract made during that time. These workers are essential for getting millions of Americans the benefits they rely on to live. Yet, SSA was ranked as the worst Federal agency to work at in Partnership for Public Service's annual ratings.

Mr. Poist, why has SSA not reopened contract negotiations with AFGE after President Biden reversed a Trump-era policy?

Mr. POIST. Thanks for that question. So, we have great partnership with, actually, all three of our unions, including AFGE. We actually, last summer, we did come to terms with six contract articles with AFGE, and we are actually in negotiations with AFGE right now for another six articles.

Ms. LEE. Thank you. Often it is the frontline workers who get the most flak, yet the hardest work. One of my constituents was mistakenly listed as deceased by SSA, and in the process of fixing the issue, some Medicaid payments were made in error. Ms. Hill lost some of that vital money. My district team was able to work with SSA to quickly fix the issue, and they issued them a reimbursement check. But again, if SSA had the resources and funding they need, my district team would not need to step in. Despite all of this, we do have some positive steps being taken.

Mr. Levins, can you briefly explain what the Technology Modernization Fund, or TMF, is?

Mr. LEVINS. Yes. The TMF was a vehicle that we were able to leverage to basically get a loan to fund the development of our replacement production system. The production system that we use at NPRC is about 20 years old, and it is out of date and in need of replacement. It is one of NARA's high value assets. With those funds, we were able to begin development, and we are targeting deployment in December of this year.

Ms. LEE. Thank you. I will be respectful of my time. I did want to add, my Republican colleagues seem so invested in fixing the backlog on our agencies, but I think they need to understand that cutting funding is not the answer. We need to invest in the people and tech needed to ensure that our constituents get the service they are owed from their government.

I yield back.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentlewoman yields back her time.

We now yield to the distinguished gentleman from Florida, the gentleman, Mr. Donalds.

Mr. DONALDS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Quick comment on spending levels. The Federal agencies are spending more than—up over 40 percent from where they were in pre-COVID spending levels. COVID-19 is now over. Not sure what additional work the agencies are having to do, except for backlog work that the agencies were not able to get to because a lot of Federal workers were at home and not actually in the office going through the practices that they are hired to do.

And look, I get it. It was COVID-19. You are not quite sure what you are dealing with. That made sense in year one. But year 2 and year 3, that made little sense to continue to leave the offices closed or on partial schedules. And from what we understand from previous testimony from the Director of Office of Personnel Management, that there are still members of the Federal workforce who have not returned to the office still today. Like, that is a significant problem.

Cutting money from the Federal agencies because we continue to overspend drastically is a good and healthy fiscal thing that we should be doing in our country, and if that means that there are services that our people need and are going to need, then maybe Washington should rethink its policy overall to make sure that we can address the needs of the American people while not wasting the money of the American people.

To the witness panel, thanks for being here. Going to pose a couple of questions here. Really just, you can answer whether it is acceptable or not.

Ms. BITTER, I am going to start with you. A government that enforces an essential business-only policy, while simultaneously paying its employees full salaries, while millions of Americans wait inexcusable amounts of time for basic required services, is that acceptable or not?

Ms. BITTER. I am sorry, sir. The question is broadly speaking?

Mr. DONALDS. If we develop an essential businesses-only policy, but everybody is still getting paid full-time, full benefits, while Americans are having to wait exorbitant amount of times, and,

frankly, they have to call their Member of Congress to help them—help weed through the bureaucracy, is that acceptable or is it not acceptable?

Ms. BITTER. I just want to make sure I understand the question, sir, please forgive me.

Mr. DONALDS. Sure.

Ms. BITTER. So essential businesses only, I think what I hear you asking is about parts of the government that were closed except to essential services. Is that correct?

Mr. DONALDS. Yes, ma'am. Is that acceptable or not?

Ms. BITTER. I can speak only for my organization and for the passport services, which I think is what people are most interested in. We have been, again, open since June 2020. And while the pandemic certainly disrupted our operations, we never stopped serving the public throughout for the entirety of the time.

Mr. DONALDS. I would argue it has been very delayed.

Mr. Levins, what about you? Is that acceptable or not?

Mr. LEVINS. Thank you for your question. I will never forget March 2020, and the day that the pandemic hit—

Mr. DONALDS. Mr. Levins, I agree. I was there too. We all remember March 2020. The question is: In September 2020, in March 2021, in September 2021, in March 2022, is it still acceptable for the American people to require services of their government only to not be able to get them in a timely fashion because we have members of the Federal workforce who are not at their posts doing their job? Is that acceptable or not?

Mr. LEVINS. I will speak for our office. We never entirely closed.

Mr. DONALDS. Never entirely closed. OK.

Mr. Poist?

Mr. LEVINS. From day one, we had people there to perform essential services.

Mr. DONALDS. Thank you, Mr. Levins.

Mr. Poist, is that acceptable or not?

Mr. POIST. So, like the other two panelists, our offices never closed to the public. They were by appointment only.

Mr. DONALDS. Mr. Poist, let me ask you a question. What percentage of your workforce is actually in the office in the calendar year of 2021? I am going to excuse you for 2020. I get it. Early pandemic, everybody is trying to figure out what was going on. Was your office fully open in 2021?

Mr. POIST. They were not fully open in 2021.

Mr. DONALDS. Were they fully open in 2022?

Mr. POIST. They were.

Mr. DONALDS. They were fully open; everybody was back to work 100 percent in 2022? Obviously, not 100 percent. We know, people get sick, people call out, but you had, essentially, your entire workforce available to you in the year 2022?

Mr. POIST. At the end of March 2022, we had fully reentered our offices.

Mr. DONALDS. So, it took about a year and a half for everybody to kind of come back in SSA. Is that correct?

Mr. POIST. That is correct.

Mr. DONALDS. And there is no problem with that delay in people coming back to work?

Mr. POIST. I do not see a problem.

Mr. DONALDS. That is the problem, Mr. Poist, is that you do not see a problem with that. But I tell you right now, the American people see a big problem with that. When people call my office—and listen, this not a partisan thing. It can be one of—it can be an office of a Republican Member or a Democrat Member of Congress. It does not matter. But when people call in looking for help from Social Security or passport services and trying to figure out how to get something done, they are not getting an answer, they got hung up on on the phone, so they call our offices; and when we call—and I get it, when we call, everybody is jumping through hoops to answer the call of a congressional office; you guys do not think there is a problem with that? Because I do.

Listen, we will take care of every constituent request. It does not matter who the constituent is. But when the only answer a constituent gets is from their Member of Congress to basically rattle the cages of the bureaucracy, that is a major problem, and it is unacceptable.

I yield back.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentleman yields back his time.

The gentlewoman from New Mexico, Ms. Stansbury.

Ms. STANSBURY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And I want to say thank you, first of all, to our Federal agencies and employees who are here with us today.

And I want to just start by saying that casework and helping New Mexicans is the bread and butter of my congressional office. It is a huge percentage of the work that we do on behalf of my constituents. That includes everything from helping our veterans, to helping our elders and seniors with Social Security, helping with immigration issues with the State Department. And these are very serious issues, and obviously, all of us and all of our constituents are experiencing real-life impacts that are affecting their families and their lives.

But I do want to take a moment, because it really bothers me when my colleagues bring folks in front of this Committee, which is an oversight Committee, and then attack our Federal public servants, folks who literally are working for us every single day to try to address these issues. And the facts are that when you freeze hiring, when you cut pay, when you do not backfill jobs, and when you consistently attack Federal employees, it affects their morale, it affects Federal hiring, and it affects the services that our agencies are able to actually provide to the American people.

So, the facts show that when we are not adequately funding our agencies, when we are not adequately staffing our agencies, and when we do not support our Federal personnel, we see the kind of issues that we are seeing here today. So, obviously, we want to talk a little bit about some of the challenges that the constituents across the U.S., but in my district in particular, are facing.

New Mexico is a place where a disproportionate number of our families are low income. Our seniors depend on their access to Social Security to live, in some cases, check to check, and we also have one of the highest percentages of the number of individuals who are veterans and who have served in our military, and we are very grateful for their service.

And I have to tell you that I actually, in preparation for this hearing, spoke in depth with our staff about their casework and what they have been seeing in each of our Federal agencies. And, in fact, we have a Social Security service center in my district in Albuquerque.

Now, first of all, when it comes to Social Security, I actually agree with my colleagues on the other side of the aisle on this issue. Folks who are on Social Security, many of them obviously are elders. Many of them do not feel comfortable using some of the technologies that the Federal Government is trying to transition to.

And when they call our regional offices or they call the 800 number, and they get a runaround by an employee who is not physically in the office, it means that they are not going to be able to get their check. It means they are not going to be able to pay their rent. It means they are not going to be able to go grocery shopping and put food on the table. And for many of our folks who are also living with disabilities, it means that they are also not able to get qualified for their disability support systems.

So, one of my asks, and I hope that you will take this back, Mr. Poist, to the Social Security Administration and to those who are up the chain who are listening today, is, we do need those offices reopened. We do need more staff physically in person. And we need to not be leaving our elders, seniors, and people with disabilities standing in long lines outside of Social Security offices trying to get their Social Security checks and benefits approved. So, I do want to make that point.

Second, Ms. Bitter, I am very appreciative of your work. I will tell you, I think everyone here is having this experience right now. The passport backlog, the backlog on immigration and other issues that we are seeing is really just astronomical right now. And we have not received an adequate answer in my office about why we are suddenly hitting a wall.

Like some of my colleagues, you know, normally, our regional folks are fantastic. They help us solve problems when we call, or we ask for help. But even now we are really running into some huge problems. So, can you please explain why are we seeing this backlog, and when do you hope to actually get it resolved?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you for the question, Congresswoman. I just want to clarify, we are talking about passports?

Ms. STANSBURY. Yes.

Ms. BITTER. Yes. Thank you. So just to—for the big picture and to back up and explain a little bit about where we are. We are fee-funded, and our revenue comes from fees paid for the services that we provide. And like the rest of the State Department, we went into the pandemic at a deficit from hiring freezes in prior years. And then, because we are fee-funded and travel stopped, our fees dropped, and we had to implement further hiring freezes.

So, by the time travel came back and our fees rebounded about 18 months ago, we were starting 25 percent down from where we had been.

Ms. STANSBURY. And, Ms. Bitter, I am so sorry to interrupt you, but we are short on time. Can you tell us when you can expect to be caught up on this backlog?

Ms. BITTER. Sure. We anticipate that by the end of the calendar year we will be at pre-pandemic waiting levels, and that later in the summer and then throughout the fall, wait times will continue to fall incrementally.

Ms. STANSBURY. And, Mr. Chairman, I know I am out of time, but I do want to just say one quick thing.

Mr. Levins, I am grateful that you are here today. We are also seeing significant backlogs in getting those Federal records for our veterans, and, in fact, one of my constituents was unable to get a veteran's home loan because he did not get his paperwork in time. So, please let us know how we can help support your agencies. We know that you need support and funding and staffing, and we just really are grateful for all the work that you do. So, thank you.

I yield back

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentlewoman yields back her time.

The distinguished gentleman from South Carolina, the gentleman, Mr. Timmons, is recognized.

Mr. TIMMONS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As everyone is aware, we just had a long debt ceiling fight, and the outcome was determined by 11 percent of the budget. Our leaders preemptively removed 89 percent of spending from any conversation. We have \$32 trillion of debt. We are on an unsustainable path, and it is a national security threat to this country.

The solution lies in three areas: Healthcare, immigration, and Social Security. And so, I am going to talk about Social Security right now, and I am going to begin this by saying that I am not proposing that we take away anyone's Social Security that has paid into the system. But we have structural deficiencies. We have problems.

And, Mr. Poist, I am going to go over those with you real quick. So, what year was Social Security created?

Mr. POIST. 1935.

Mr. TIMMONS. And what was the retirement age in the Social Security Act of 1935?

Mr. POIST. Actually, I am not aware of that answer.

Mr. TIMMONS. 65 is the answer.

Do you know what life expectancy was in 1935? No? 59. That math works. It does not take an actuarial model to see that if most people are living to 59 and you do not get Social Security until 65, that math works.

What is the retirement age now?

Mr. POIST. I think it varies based on your date of birth.

Mr. TIMMONS. 67 is generally the earliest that most people can retire at this point. Is that fair?

Mr. POIST. Sounds fair.

Mr. TIMMONS. OK. And do you know what the life expectancy is in 2023?

Mr. POIST. I do not.

Mr. TIMMONS. 76. 76. So, we have a problem. We have a problem. I have here the 2003 annual report of the board of trustees of the Federal Old Age and Survivors Insurance and Federal Disability Insurance Trust Funds. They are required to do an annual communication to Congress and to the President. And in this communication, it says—I will summarize it—basically, we got 10 years at

best until we go into austerity measures, where individuals that have paid in that are due benefits from these programs, we will not be able to meet our obligations.

Do you know what happens when we go into austerity measures for Social Security?

Mr. POIST. I do not. We have to get back to you on that one.

Mr. TIMMONS. OK. So, the report here says that if nothing is done, 80 percent of benefits—so if you are supposed to get a dollar, you get 80 cents—will occur in 2023. There is also discrepancy as to what year this is. A couple of models say it is going to be sooner, almost 3 years sooner.

So, the challenge here is that the people that are responsible for administering these benefits are saying that there is a problem. And I am actually just going to read the end.

The trustees recommend that lawmakers address the projected trust fund shortfalls in a timely way in order to phase in necessary changes gradually and give workers and beneficiaries time to adjust to them. Implementing changes sooner rather than later would allow more generations to share in the needed revenue increases or reductions in scheduled benefits. Social Security will play a critical role in the lives of 67 million beneficiaries and 180 million covered workers and their families during 2023. With informed discussion, creative thinking, and timely legislative action, Social Security can continue to protect future generations.

So, the people that are responsible for administering the programs that we all hold dear are saying that they have a problem, and they want Congress to do something about it. And our leaders preemptively said we are not going to discuss Social Security, healthcare, and immigration when resolving our \$32 trillion in debt. There was brief talk of a commission the day of the vote, but that never has materialized.

So, I just think that this is a major problem. I think that the longer we wait, the worse it will get. And I think that it is incredibly irresponsible for us to not begin conversations on how to save Social Security, because the people responsible for administering the program are saying that there is a major problem, and we are doing nothing. And the American people deserve better.

And I hope that this Congress can get together and find a path forward, because the alternative is very bad for the American people, and we were sent here to solve problems, and this is a big problem, and it is past time that we give it the attention it is due.

And with that, Mr. Chairman, I will yield back.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentleman yields back his time. Thank you very much.

The distinguished gentlewoman from the District of Columbia, Ms. Norton, is recognized.

Ms. NORTON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

For more than a decade—I say this to our witnesses—congressional Republicans or their Majorities have sought to severely constrain the Federal budget, causing lasting harm to agencies. So, this is a question for all of the witnesses here today. Is your agency able to function properly if it is underfunded, yes or no?

Ms. BITTER. No.

Mr. LEVINS. No.

Mr. POIST. No, we are not.

Ms. NORTON. In 2017, congressional Democrats signed a letter expressing concern to then President Trump that the Social Security Administration's declining budget would affect services to some of America's most vulnerable citizens.

I ask unanimous consent to insert this letter into the record, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. SESSIONS. Without objection, that letter will be entered.

Ms. NORTON. Thank you.

That year, the Social Security Administration's declining budget led to the closure of 64 field offices nationwide, a burgeoning in disability hearings backlog with an average of 540-day waiting period, increased wait times at every point of contact and extended durations for retirement and disability appointments. Because of the dire underfunding, Social Security Administration has had to impose an agency-wide hiring freeze multiple times, forcing fewer employees to serve more constituents.

Mr. Poist, in 16 out of 20 last appropriations cycles, Social Security received significantly less than it told Congress that it needed. How has this consistent underfunding affected your agency's ability to serve older Americans and those with disabilities?

Mr. POIST. Thank you for that question. So, the history of underfunding at Social Security has led to some of the challenges we have talked about, right. I mean, staffing being one of them, right. We hit our lowest level of staffing in 25 years in Fiscal Year 2022. Again, we did receive an increase in our appropriation in 2023, so that has allowed us to rebuild some of our staffing. Pleased to report, as of today, we are up about 2,000 people from where we ended Fiscal Year 2022.

But the underfunding that you were asking about, it also has hindered our ability to implement new IT initiatives across the agency. It has also limited our ability to fund overtime for our frontline operations to work down some of these critical backlogs.

Ms. NORTON. All right. Mr. Poist, this is another question for you. In fiscal 2022, the Social Security Administration reported its smallest workforce in 25 years, the result of insufficient funding. But the number of beneficiaries the agency served increased by more than 10 million people in the past decade. Field offices, payment centers, and disability determination services agencies throughout the country continue to operate under the effects of decreased staffing while also helping more people at some of the most vulnerable and sensitive moments.

Sustained funding cuts have chopped the Social Security Administration's current budget. When adjusted for inflation, its funding has decreased more than 17 percent over the last 17 years. At the same time, largely because of an aging population, the number of people qualifying for benefits has increased 21 percent.

So, Mr. Poist, how would sufficient funding and staffing affect your agency's ability to provide customer service to older Americans and those experiencing a disability?

Mr. POIST. So, with support of our fiscal—of the Fiscal Year 2024 President's budget request, I think we would see significant improvements to almost all of our customer service metrics. And I mentioned some in my oral testimony, we would see the national

800 number wait time decrease from 35 minutes this year to 20 minutes next year. We would also see all parts of the disability process; the production of volumes improve as well in 2024. We would also be able to continue modernizing some of our IT systems and developing those online suite of services to help customers reach us both online and in person.

Ms. NORTON. Congress needs to provide adequate funding to Federal agencies to bolster their workforce and by providing workers adequate compensation, offering comparable benefits, and exploring other steps to attract the next generation of Federal workers. Otherwise, it may be very difficult for agencies to make progress on backlogs and improve customer service.

And, Mr. Chairman, I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentlewoman yields back her time. Thank you very much.

The gentleman from North Carolina, Mr. Edwards, is recognized.

Mr. EDWARDS. Thank you, Mr. Chair. And I certainly appreciate you convening this hearing.

I think it is important for us to understand how our Federal agencies are working, how they are failing, and how we can better provide service to the Americans that pay their taxes and expect a high level of services.

There is an awful lot to unpack here with three distinguished folks like this, but I would like to focus just a bit on passports. That seems to be one of the issues that my office deals with the most. And do not get me wrong, I am excited to be in a place and my staff certainly is eager to help those with passport issues. And we get all kinds of calls with folks that need to go to weddings and honeymoons and have business trips and sales calls and mission trips and vacations of a lifetime, and seem to not be able to get service from the State Department on passports.

In fact, while I see the role of a congressional office as being one to help break loose a logjam with bureaucracy, I feel that my office is now often the first point of contact. In fact, there have been situations where constituents would call and ask for help with a passport—to a passport agency, and then be told by that agency, you need to call your Congressman. And then my staff takes in the information and turns around and calls the agency back. It seems to be a very awkward, inefficient way to run things.

And so, I have just a few questions on that. Ms. Bitter, I think I heard you say that 100 percent of the employees in—I am going to call it Department of State—are back at work live. Is that correct?

Ms. BITTER. All of our passport—our public facing passport offices are open and have been open since June 2020 with their staff in the office.

Mr. EDWARDS. And so, I get reports—because there is so many folks that are told they have to go visit an office, sometimes in Charleston, sometimes in Atlanta. I represent North Carolina in the southeast. Folks have driven all the way to Charleston to see locked doors.

Is that something you would be aware of, or can you think of a reason that that passport office might have doors closed?

Ms. BITTER. Sure. Thank you for the question. I should also say, first of all, we are grateful for the partnership of your constituent services staff. That is really important to us to be able to work with your staff to be able to draw to our attention problems that people may be having.

Most of our passport centers and agencies have public counters. They see 23,000 people per week on an emergency basis. We try to publicize widely our service expectations, which is 10 to 13 weeks right now, so that people can plan for their trips.

It happens that Charleston is not one of our agencies that has a public counter. So—but I think the closest one to your constituents would be in Atlanta.

Mr. EDWARDS. We have sent a number of folks to Atlanta.

What are the performance metrics for your agency? How do you measure success? How do you measure productivity of employees?

Ms. BITTER. There are—how do we measure productivity? Overall, what we want to see is a reduction in wait times. We are disappointed with the wait times. We think they are high. And we anticipate that they will be going down later in the summer, back to pre-pandemic levels by the end of the calendar year. There are negotiations with the union service expectations and production standards, but I do not know off the top of my head what they are.

Mr. EDWARDS. And that is a bit vague to me as a business person. And I hear you saying that you are looking for reduction in wait times. What are the wait times right now?

Ms. BITTER. Right now, it is 10 to 13 weeks is the service expectation for a regular passport, and I think it is seven to 9 weeks for an expedited passport.

Mr. EDWARDS. Those are the times right now?

Ms. BITTER. Uh-huh.

Mr. EDWARDS. Do you have a goal for your agency what it should be?

Ms. BITTER. Pre-pandemic, wait times typically, although it is seasonal, were 6 to 8 weeks and 2 to 3 or 4 weeks per expedite. We anticipate we will be back there at the end of the calendar year. We were there at the beginning of this fiscal year. We were, I think, 7 to 9 weeks. We are experiencing unprecedented demand. Last year, we issued 22 million passport books and cards, which was the most ever. And this year, we are on track to do 15 percent above that, and that accounts for the wait times.

Mr. EDWARDS. And so that lends another question. Could we have anticipated, should we have anticipated the pent-up demand, which appears to me what we are experiencing after COVID? Now folks are traveling and trying to make up for lost trips. Could we—is there something we could have done to anticipate that demand?

Ms. BITTER. What we have been doing is continuing to aggressively hire passport adjudicators. We came out of the pandemic after hiring freezes that we were rebuilding from and then hiring freezes because of the loss of the fees that we collect for travel. We were 25 percent below where we had been 4 years before. So, we have been working very hard to rehire people, to hire as much staff as possible. We have hired 10 percent of our staff within the last year. We have 10 percent in the pipeline now. We submitted a plan, an ops plan, that was approved yesterday by Congress for

Fiscal Year 2023, requesting more positions and more investment in technology.

Mr. EDWARDS. Today, how many positions are not filled to deal with passports that are funded?

Ms. BITTER. I think we have about a 10 percent vacancy rate, but I will have to confirm that.

Mr. EDWARDS. About a number?

Ms. BITTER. I think we probably have—I do not know the answer to that, where we have requested 177 more in the ops plan.

Mr. EDWARDS. All right.

Ms. BITTER. And I think we probably have about a hundred that we need to fill right now, 100, 110. But we will have to confirm that.

Mr. EDWARDS. So, I would just like to say, Mr. Chair, if I might, because I see my time is expiring, my staff is mostly complementary about the interaction that they have with those folks dealing with passports, once they are able to make contact. But my staff spends an inordinate amount of time on hold and calling back to make that contact. And it just seems as though we could do, we should do better by the American people with a service that only government can perform. Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I yield back.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentleman yields back his time. I also want to thank the gentleman for requesting this hearing several weeks ago, and I hope that this meets some of that expectation of getting answers. Thank you very much.

The distinguished gentleman from Maryland, the Ranking Member of the Committee, my friend, Mr. Raskin, is recognized.

Mr. RASKIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, very kindly for recognizing me.

The philosophy in my office is that everything we do is about constituent service, whether it is helping people get their Social Security checks, helping people get their passports, getting PPP loans. And when I go to vote on something like expanding America's infrastructure investment or lowering prescription drug costs that, too, is in service of our people. So that ethos informs everything we do.

I agree with my friend from New Mexico who said that, as politicians, we cannot defund the government and then rail against the government. We need to make sufficient resources available so we can actually serve our people. But I am speaking as someone who supports funding the government to get the work done, and I have had some problems.

And I want to start by referring to a constituent who is immunocompromised and applied for disability benefits from SSI in spring of last year. And she quickly got a denial for a nonmedical reason. It took more than 6 months for the Social Security Administration to tell her that she had simply checked the wrong box about obtaining her records, and had she checked the correct box, she was told, it would have changed the determination in her case.

So, she reapplied. She waited another 6 months to get her case assigned to a different examiner. And in April of this year, she contacted me for help getting a status update on where things stood, and then she got another denial a month later.

She had been unable to work since before the pandemic, and now needs a Social Security determination once again, which could take yet another year. Despite being immunocompromised, she finally had to get a part-time job because she was flat out broke. She then caught COVID-19 on the job.

This story about seeming bureaucratic indifference and lethargy in responding to one of our fellow citizens is not unique. My district office hears hundreds of cases like this every year from desperate constituents who have been waiting and cannot get a status update from Federal agencies, like Social Security, which is probably not the worst, from my experience.

Mr. Poist, what is causing these delays, and what can Congress do to help to remove the logjam?

Mr. POIST. Sure. Thank you so much for that question. And, you know, we have got a lot of challenges with the initial disability process, and we feel deeply for that, the delays that that constituent waited. So, a lot of problems leading into the pandemic relating to long wait times, pendings growing, have been led mostly by recruitment and retention challenges in our states. Again, that worsened during the pandemic.

I think we got a good plan in place to reverse course here. Really what can Congress do? That is support the Fiscal Year 2024 President's budget request that allows us to rebuild staffing at both the agency and our State DDS partners. You know, staffing is probably the No. 1 concern in those State DDSs. I mentioned previously that we have seen record high attrition the last 3 years in those State DDSs.

We are also working on a comprehensive plan for the initial disability backlog that we hope to release sometime later this year.

Mr. RASKIN. Well, I hope you do that sooner rather than later. We do not want a backlog in the plan to deal with the backlog. You know, if we can move that quickly. And I appreciate your hard work on this, and if there is anything we can do to help, let us know. It is hard to think of anything more important to us.

You know, for passport help, my office has opened a thousand cases in the first 6 months of this year, which is double what we opened in all of last year. And it is impossible to manage our constituents' expectations because the Office of Passport Services continues to change the processing times, and that is not an acceptable way for us to be doing business.

Recently, the Washington Passport Agency, which is the passport office closest to my district, announced it can no longer help with congressional inquiries on behalf of our constituents. We are told that only in cases of life or death emergency can we work to schedule our constituents for appointments. But if the constituent is on the phone all day and randomly manages to get through to the National Passport Information Center themselves, the call representative can then schedule a local appointment, even without a life or death emergency.

So, Ms. Bitter, why are the congressional offices encountering such radical discrepancies in policy and inconsistency about whether and when and how we can actually help our constituents get their passports?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you, sir. I am surprised to hear that your staff received that feedback. I really appreciate it. Now that we know, we can fix it. That is not our policy.

Mr. RASKIN. Can we contact you?

Ms. BITTER. Yes.

Mr. RASKIN. Because I have got people working full time on this now.

Ms. BITTER. We would be grateful, actually. We work very closely with constituent services staff. We would be grateful to be in touch with you.

Mr. RASKIN. OK. My staff is very nice, and they are very good.

Ms. BITTER. So is mine, I promise.

Mr. RASKIN. We will get in touch with you. All right. Good. Then we will be able to remove some of the obstacles here. And I appreciate that.

And I yield back to you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for calling this important hearing.

Mr. SESSIONS. Yes, sir. And I thank the distinguished gentleman for taking time, not only to join us, but for his specific information that would be aimed at helping those organizations achieve a better viewpoint. Thank you, sir.

The gentlewoman from Colorado, Mrs. Boebert, is recognized.

Mrs. BOEBERT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Director Levins, as director of the NPRC, how many unanswered requests do you currently have?

Mr. LEVINS. As of yesterday, there were 338,000 unanswered requests, of which 265,000 are considered backlogged.

Mrs. BOEBERT. And how many unanswered requests are too many?

Mr. LEVINS. We service about 30,000 a week, and generally speaking, prior to the pandemic, our customer service standard we were trying to achieve was 10-day turnaround times. So, more than 60,000 would be too many to serve in 10 days or less.

Mrs. BOEBERT. So, I know for a fact that my congressional office has contacted the NPRC multiple times to help veterans obtain a copy of their records to verify eligibility and receive their benefits. We saw the backlog of requests skyrocketed to over 600,000. And this is oftentimes too late for a veteran to receive lifesaving care because bureaucrats were refusing to show up for work.

So, I see that number is about half now, but are your employees back at work full-time?

Mr. LEVINS. Yes.

Mrs. BOEBERT. In person?

Mr. LEVINS. Yes, since March 2022.

Mrs. BOEBERT. March 2022. And from what I understand, the backlog has decreased significantly after the NPRC returned to in-person work, after multiple requests from Congress to do exactly that.

You said you came back to work in 2022, everyone came back in person. Why did that take so long?

Mr. LEVINS. So, I want to be clear. First of all, we never closed entirely. We always maintained a skeletal crew there to make sure we handled the most urgent requests, such as those involving funerals, medical emergencies, homeless veterans seeking shelter.

Throughout the pandemic, as local health conditions improved, we were able to bring additional people into the building. We worked with the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health to review our building blueprints, our HVAC systems, and inform our leadership on what the safe amount of occupancy in the building was.

At the time, our records were analog, not digital. We were not able to work remotely. We have made a lot of changes since then.

Mrs. BOEBERT. Correct. Yes. Agencies are transitioning away from paper records, but NPRC still stores millions of records in two facilities in St. Louis. When a veteran or former civilian employee needs a copy of their records often to verify these eligibilities for benefits and whatnot, the NPRC staff has to pull and file those and process the requests. So, it is clearly impossible to do that remotely, so that would explain why your backlog reached 600,000. I am happy to hear that it is down, but I think there is still a lot of work to do because this is certainly impacting my constituents back home.

Deputy Commissioner Poist, how did the SSA's transition to exclusively remote customer service during COVID negatively impact elderly citizens who previously relied on in-person service?

Mr. POIST. Thank you for that question. So, in the early days of the pandemic, we definitely recognized some challenges that we experienced as we transitioned from that in-person service to mostly telephone and internet service in the early days of the pandemic. I think once we were able to, and I call it find our footing, I think service did improve to the American public. We did experience also some challenges with our 800 number. I think we have since kind of overcome those challenges. We see a stable system today, and we are hoping to implement our new Next Generation Telephony Project system by the end of this fiscal year.

Mrs. BOEBERT. Can the SSA expedite disability determinations for applicants who do not have over 200 days to receive the benefits that they are entitled to?

Mr. POIST. Once they give them back for the record, I will have to get our operational experts to weigh in on that one.

Mrs. BOEBERT. Thank you.

Assistant Secretary Bitter, if your family had planned a trip and they needed their passports, they needed them issued, renewed, would you prefer to have your appointment before or after the trip is scheduled?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you for the question. We publish our service standards widely so that people do not have to make that choice, so that they can renew their passport before they make their plans.

Mrs. BOEBERT. So, in my district, due to the backlog of the Department of State, several of my constituents and their families did not receive their passports on time. And when they requested appointments, they were scheduled for after their trips. This certainly has caused many families to have to cancel their trips whether, you know, that is for pleasure or something serious. And this is an issue that comes up in all of our offices regularly. And so, we would love to work with you to expedite all of these services that are provided and that are represented here today.

Ms. BITTER. We would love to work with your constituent services staff.

Mrs. BOEBERT. Yes, ma'am. Thank you.

Ms. BITTER. Thank you.

Mrs. BOEBERT. Mr. Chairman, I yield.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentlewoman yields back her time. Thank you very much.

The gentleman from Florida, Mr. Frost, is recognized.

Mr. FROST. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I am proud to represent central Florida here in the U.S. Congress. Central Florida is home to Orlando, one of the top tourist destinations in the entire country. The closest passport agency to Orlando, Florida, is actually in Miami. It is about 235 miles away, about a 4-hour drive, an expensive plane ticket or train ticket to get there. The Miami Passport Agency is only open Monday through Friday, 7 a.m. until 2 p.m.

I am concerned about the people who work Monday through Friday, the working class people who have a hard time taking off to go travel 4 hours to Miami for their passport applications.

Assistant Secretary Bitter, I understand the Miami Passport Agency staff are working extremely hard under the constraints that they have and the hours that they are open. The problem for my constituents is it is not always possible to take time off to get down there. Are there any solutions that come to mind on ways that we can address this problem?

Ms. BITTER. Yes. Thank you so much for the question, Congressman. We have 7,000 acceptance agencies across the United States where people can apply in person. For renewals, of course, people can send them in by mail.

When we do our geographic surveys, we find that 95 percent of our customers live within 25 miles of an acceptance agency, and 90 percent of Americans live within a 5-hour drive of a counter.

What we are aiming to do, of course, is to ensure that our service standards are widely publicized so people can plan their trips and they do not have to go to a passport agency, and also to invest in technology so people can have more access to the ability to apply from their own homes.

We would love to work with you if there are more opportunities to increase the number of acceptance facilities so people can apply in person in your district. We would love to work with you on that.

Mr. FROST. OK. Perfect, perfect. I would love to work with you on that well.

Assistant Secretary Bitter, yesterday I sent a letter to Deputy Assistant Secretary Arndt, asking if the Department of State would consider accepting appointments on Saturday at that office.

Would you be able to commit to taking a look at that letter and exploring that option, just so that way working families, who have a hard time getting there during the week, they have an opportunity to go to a counter and see somebody?

Ms. BITTER. Certainly. And, in fact, our counters across the network have—each of them have opened some weekend hours, but I would love to look at that letter and will certainly work with you on that.

Mr. FROST. Perfect. Thank you so much.

Ms. BITTER. Thank you.

Mr. FROST. Thank you to committing to taking a look at the letter, looking at how we can accommodate working families on a Saturday, and also looking at how we can probably get a counter in Florida's 10th congressional District. My constituents have family reunions, business trips, honeymoons to get to, and so we just want to make sure we are doing everything we can to advocate for them.

I was just this morning rallying with AFGE with a lot of our workers. One of my colleagues brought this up earlier, but the Social Security Administration currently ranks as one of the worst Federal workplaces.

Mr. Poist, what is being done to support our government employees who are currently working under some pretty severe constraints in terms of capacity?

Mr. POIST. Thanks for that question. So, you know, again, staffing is really the No. 1 reason that our employees are reporting they feel overworked. So, again, with the Fiscal Year 2023 appropriation that we received—and again, we are grateful for the increase we received over Fiscal Year 2022—we have implemented a pretty aggressive hiring plan for this year. I already mentioned that we reported about 2,000 net gains so far this fiscal year, so kind of a help is on the way for those employees out there on our front lines who are working day in and day out for us.

So, I think that is the biggest challenge that we see, is they need staff. They need the additional support in their offices next to them.

Mr. FROST. For the next fiscal year, Social Security Administration requests additional funding to improve customer service and field offices and hot lines, address processing center backlogs, and reduce the disability claims backlog. I know you have been expressing that capacity is really the main root cause of a lot of the problems we are seeing.

Which Federal body is in charge of funding the Social Security Administration?

Mr. POIST. I am sorry. I am not sure I understand your question.

Mr. FROST. Which Federal body is in charge of funding the Social Security Administration? Who approves your budget?

Mr. POIST. Oh, Congress.

Mr. FROST. U.S. Congress. What percentage of the funding your agency requested has actually been authorized?

Mr. POIST. So, for like 14 of the last 20 years, we have not received the President's budget level of requested funding. So, again, we have been severely underfunded for multiple years.

Mr. FROST. Yes. Well, there you have it. I mean, the reason why disability claims are slower than molasses is not, you know, just a fact of life; it is because Republicans in Congress repeatedly have chosen to defund the Social Security and the Social Security Administration.

What was the effect of telework during the pandemic?

Mr. POIST. So, really, telework allowed our operations to continue during the pandemic when our service transitioned to mostly a telephone-based service, again, during the early parts of the pandemic. Again, our offices never fully closed to the public. They were limited to appointments only to protect both our employees and the

visiting public who often, you know, met some of those vulnerability criteria with the pandemic.

So, really, telework allowed us to continue our operations. And now that we have fully reentered back in March 2022—again, we do have telework still within the agency itself. It is mostly driven by a business decision. Managers decide who is telework eligible and who is not telework eligible, and also the flexibility to recall or suspend telework in our field offices if there is an expected high demand day or something like that.

Mr. FROST. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentleman yields back his time. Thank you very much.

The gentleman from Missouri, Mr. Burlison, is recognized. And I want to thank him for sticking out through this entire hearing.

Mr. BURLISON. I am the clean-up hitter.

Mr. SESSIONS. Yes, sir.

Mr. BURLISON. Thank you.

Thank you, everyone, for coming. Appreciate the work that you do for the citizens of the United States. I would be remiss if I did not convey—you know, and it is not anyone's particular fault, but the frustration that our constituents have when they call, whether it is they are canceling their family vacation, or, you know, someone is not getting their information timely from—as a veteran, or people cannot get into the Social Security office. I mean, our offices are fielding those calls, and so we appreciate the work that you do to work with our office staff.

And so, I kind of want to go this route of questions. I come from the private sector, worked in IT. We had tickets. Whenever you have somebody call in, we had software that managed those tickets. We managed—because of that, we were able to look at particular employee data, look at a department, be able to identify ticket turnaround time, how that compares, how that is normative compared to other departments. We were able to identify employees that were exceptional.

And then we would send out surveys. And then you would be able to determine, not only is an employee fast, but people are happy. People like talking to that employee. They are very pleasant to deal with.

So, I am asking this question because I want to know: Is your agency going about the process of doing the same thing, collecting information about the productivity of your staff? And we can start with Honorable Bitter, and then move on.

Ms. BITTER. Thank you. Absolutely, we have a very productive staff. The challenges that we are experiencing—frankly, not unlike—I mean, we are coming out of a pandemic that has challenged sectors across the United States. Where our challenges are is we have not enough employees right now to handle what is record setting, unprecedented—

Mr. BURLISON. Do you have a system in place where you are able to keep track of the volume that they are taking on, the tickets, their turnaround time, the satisfaction scores? So, you are keeping that?

Ms. BITTER. We keep that for the agency and also for our call center and for all parts of our organization.

Mr. BURLISON. Do you use that data for individuals on their annual report? Is there any kind of merit pay based on their success or satisfaction?

Ms. BITTER. I do not know the answer to that, actually. It is certainly part of the performance review of people. I do not know specifically how the data is used.

Mr. BURLISON. Because coming from the private sector, that is what we do. Your performance—a portion of your merit performance or pay increase is dependent upon data, as opposed to, you know, whether or not people at work like you or your manager likes you. So—

Ms. BITTER. Understood. Understood.

Mr. BURLISON. So, something to consider.

Same question, Mr. Levins.

Mr. LEVINS. Thank you for your question. Yes, we are a very numbers-driven organization, and we have a pretty sophisticated production system, so every transaction does get assigned a number to it. All of our employees have performance plans. Most of the jobs lend themselves to quantitative production and qualitative standards as well, and that is how they are evaluated. And there is also incentive programs based on your productivity achievements. And then—

Mr. BURLISON. That is good. So, you do have incentive programs?

Mr. LEVINS. Yes, yes.

Mr. BURLISON. That is great. Go ahead. I stopped you.

OK. Let us move—Mr. Poist, same question.

Mr. POIST. Sure. I think your original question was about surveys. I do appreciate the question. So, we do extensively survey some of our employees. We do a Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey each year.

Mr. BURLISON. So, you are asking the employees if they are satisfied. I am asking if the people that you serve, the taxpayers, if you are surveying them?

Mr. POIST. Yes.

Mr. BURLISON. OK.

Mr. POIST. So, we also survey our customers pretty extensively as well. So, we have an “always on” online survey, so any member of the public can go online at any time they choose and fill out a survey.

Mr. BURLISON. And then are you using any kind of merit pay or performance pay?

Mr. POIST. I would have to get back to you on whether we use that in performance management.

Mr. BURLISON. OK. I would encourage you to do that.

My next question, I have got little time, has to do with how do we improve. So, Ms. Bitter, how do we digitize and streamline and improve the process of getting a passport, renewing a passport?

And then I would ask Mr. Levins same thing. How do we streamline the ability for someone, a veteran, to just—they should be able to login and just download all the documents that belong to them.

Go ahead.

Ms. BITTER. Thank you for the question.

We piloted earlier this year our online passport renewal system. 565,000 Americans renewed their passport online; 12,000 filled out

a survey saying that they were very satisfied. It was a pilot where we were consolidating the lessons that we learned before we roll it out before the end of the year, and five million Americans should be able to take advantage of it.

Mr. BURLISON. Thank you.

Mr. LEVINS. As I testified earlier, the majority of the holdings in our facility are analog or paper records. In the late 1990's, early 2000's, the military departments began setting up electronic personnel systems, but on a point-forward basis. They did not go back and digitize all of the paper that is going back to the Spanish-American War in our building. However—and that is why we struggled during the pandemic because we did not have access to electronic records. However, the VA is aggressively digitizing at a rate faster than I have ever seen in my lifetime. They are digitizing more and more electronic records. We have built technology to enable our production system to be accessed outside of the office in case there is another event like this, or even more common, weather emergencies, people can now be productive remotely by accessing those electronic records. And we have total functionality to send them to veterans in a secure manner as well.

Mr. BURLISON. Thank you.

I yield back.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentleman yields back his time. Thank you very much.

Mr. Casar, you are now recognized.

Mr. CASAR. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. This is an important hearing, and I appreciate so many of the Members all working to solve challenges for their constituents and wanting these Federal agencies to work.

And we have stories about veterans' records and about Social Security benefits. I want to focus on some stories about what folks have been dealing with their passports and then thinking about how we can move forward from there, because this is not just about people going on trips. We have heard from constituents who—a single mother who sacrificed so much for months so that her daughter could get on a study abroad trip and that almost all falling apart, but we had to do the necessary work so that she could get on the trip; a constituent who was a recently naturalized citizen needing an emergency passport to see her father who was severely ill, and we were not able to help her to get to see him in time before his passing. I mean, these are very serious challenges that people face in their daily life, and we want to be able to be responsive. And so, I appreciate the questions around how is it that we can fix these backlogs.

I want to focus on the State Department because we do not have enough time to cover everyone. But, Ms. Bitter, folks have brought up the surge in demands that you are facing. People have brought up telework, and then there has also been conversation about staffing shortages.

Amongst those three, or any other, what percentage would you say of what you are facing in the backlog is the surge in demand for passports, a surge in requests, how much has to do with telework, and how much has to do with staffing shortages at the agency?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you for the question.

Just to zoom out a little bit, I just want to also emphasize again—first of all, thanks to your constituent services staff. We understand these challenges. We work very hard to publicize our service standards, so people do not fall into that trap. Our counter services receive 23,000 people a week. We have extended hours. We are working very hard to try to keep up with what is record demand and record staffing shortages.

If I could zoom out and say that there are really two things that the state—that we need in order to be able to meet the demand of your constituents. No. 1 is fully funding the State Department. While we are fee funded, everything that we do relies on the State Department platform—hiring, contracts, IT. All of it sits on the State Department. So, when the State Department platform is not fully funded, it is very difficult for us to hire the people that we need, to make sure that we have the technology we need to roll out these systems. So that is No. 1.

And then the second thing that we need is something that Congress already gave us, which was expanded expenditure authority so that we can move the fees that we receive to emerging challenges more efficiently. We got the expanded spending authority, but just on a year-to-year basis. For us to be able to make the kinds of investments that we want to make to be able to meet the demand and serve your constituents, investments in IT and hiring, we need the certainty to be able to strategically plan into the future, to be able to know that we will be able to expend those funds in as flexible a way as possible.

Mr. CASAR. And so, your sense or your testimony here is that it is really though increasing demand and the staffing shortage that have caused that backlog and that the President's budget has requested additional funding, but my assumption here is—but you can confirm—that if indeed we actually went and cut back on agencies that that would make the backlogs worse, not better?

Ms. BITTER. It will make it much more difficult for us to meet your constituents' demands.

Mr. CASAR. And, according to Secretary Blinken, the Trump Administration caused a loss of about a thousand jobs at the State Department because of the 16-month hiring freeze. Is it correct that that Trump hiring freeze impacted staffing levels at the State Department?

Ms. BITTER. The State Department had a 16-month hiring freeze, which we were recovering from when the pandemic hit. We had to further freeze positions because our fees were reduced. So, we came out of the pandemic 25 percent below where we had been 4 years prior.

Mr. CASAR. Thank you for your testimony. I appreciate everybody today talking about how we want to help our constituents and clear these backlogs, but I want to advocate for us funding these agencies, funding these hardworking staff, making sure that there is adequate hours, holding agencies accountable, being effective with those dollars. But we cannot break the government and then complain about how the government is broken. That cannot be our strategy moving forward if we want people to be able to get to their family funerals. If we want people to access their veteran records,

if we want people to be able to get their disability check, we have to be realistic about adequately staffing these programs, supporting hardworking staff, and then not having a strategy of breaking the government and then complaining about how government is broken.

Thank you so much. And I yield back.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentleman yields back his time.

The distinguished gentleman, Mr. Burchett, is recognized.

Mr. BURCHETT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for allowing me to be here.

I do not know why we always thank you all. You all are just supposed to do your daggum job, and we appreciate that. So, I guess I am thanking you for that and your expert coaching skills in the baseball game, Mr. Chairman; appreciate you on that.

Mr. SESSIONS. Big win.

Mr. BURCHETT. Big win, yes, sir.

Thank you all for being here. I am the 435th most powerful Member of Congress, so, by the time they get to me, all the good questions have been asked. So, as I tell most of these folks, if the question has already been asked multiple times, act like it is a very thought-provoking question and that it is the most incredible question you ever heard because we will be playing this back for my constituents, and I would like them to think I was on top of my game. So, thank you all.

My first question, though, how do you all intend—and I guess this is Ms. Bitter, Assistant Secretary, Ms.—is it Ms. Bitter? Is that Mrs., Ms., whatever? All right.

How do you intend to improve the communications to help Americans get prompt passport status updates, provide payment information, or get details on problems with their applications, like a bad photo or a missing photo application? A number of our constituents have called my office complaining about difficulties getting timely updates on their passport applications. Either they cannot get through the national passport line, or they wait at the 1-877 literally for hours and to be read the same status update available online at *travel.state.gov*.

Ms. BITTER. Thank you for—that is actually a question that has not been asked, so thank you very much.

Mr. BURCHETT. Well, I need to thank Madison Heinshon and Jennifer Lingenfelter in my office who actually handle these all the time.

Ms. BITTER. We are grateful to them.

Mr. BURCHETT. Yes, ma'am.

Ms. BITTER. So, we have been working really closely with our contractor to increase the capacity, and we have seen improvement, but we absolutely need to see more. Our call center handled like 3.5 million customer inquiries in the first 4 months of this year, I think about a million just in April. So, what they have done is they have tripled the number of phone lines, and they have hired for operators. They have expanded their hours. They have included weekend hours. They have opened up a third facility to be able to handle these calls, and they have also introduced new technology to improve responsiveness. We also have gotten volunteers together on a surge team to support them.

And you mentioned one thing that we are working on, which is the passport status check on *travel.state.gov*. We are working to improve that. We recognize that that is something that is lacking, and it does not give robust enough information. We anticipate rolling that out, I think, in the next couple of months.

Mr. BURCHETT. All right.

Ms. BITTER. So, that will take pressure off our call center.

Mr. BURCHETT. Let me follow up with that.

Are the congressional district offices being used as buffers for the Bureau of Consular Affairs? Because my office has opened up 112 passport cases in 2022, from January to June. For the same time-frame this year, the number is 304.

Ms. BITTER. Thank you. Yes, I think we—and thank you for that.

We tend to think of your constituent services staff as partners, rather than buffers. Although we are grateful anytime someone can draw to our attention challenges that a constituent is having; it is important to us because, if we do not know about it, we cannot fix it.

And I would go further, we want to work with your constituent services staff. We want to partner on outreach into your district to make sure that people do not miss trips, that they understand what the service standards are so that they can plan their travel accordingly.

Mr. BURCHETT. Yes, ma'am. But, when they are on hold for 3 hours, that—I hate to say it, but those words are very hollow, I guess I should say because that does not—when I get an angry constituent—and I can tell you it happens a lot. If I am in a church parking lot or going to the store, I can generally tell by the tone of their voice that it is going to be a question dealing with something like this, because it seems to be the real hot button right now.

And my office—the ladies in my office do an excellent job of it. So, I am pretty sure our Senator is calling them—or push them off on us as well. And a lot of times I know they are dealing with folks that are not even our constituents, and so it is very troublesome to me that this just keeps happening.

But you are telling me that they are doing something to fix this problem?

Ms. BITTER. We anticipate that our wait times will be back to pre-pandemic levels by the end of this calendar year and that, through the late summer and fall, that they will decrease incrementally.

Mr. BURCHETT. And what measures, real quickly, are being implemented to catch up on the backlog?

Ms. BITTER. We have surge teams in place across the Department of volunteers. We have called back retirees. We have kept people from their—new employees are working on passports. Surge teams across the Department actually and across the network and across the world are working to make sure that we can stay within our service standards, 10 to 13 weeks. And we recognize that we work very hard to publicize those service standards so people can plan their travel. People pay attention—unfortunately, people do not pay attention until they have a trip planned. So, we are working, again, our counters across the network see roughly 23,000 peo-

ple per week. We have extended those hours, and these are for emergency appointments, and we have included weekend hours as well.

Mr. BURCHETT. OK. I am out of time. But, ma'am, if there is ever something that we need to be doing on our end, I sure would like to know because this is really a hot button in Tennessee. I am sure it is across the country.

Ms. BITTER. Thank you.

Mr. BURCHETT. Thank you. Mr. Chairman.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentleman yields back his time. Thank you very much.

The gentlewoman from Dallas, Texas, Ms. Crockett, is recognized.

Ms. CROCKETT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And much like my colleague, a lot has already been said, a lot that I can reiterate. I think that this is probably one of the times we are a little bit more bipartisan in that our constituent work is being comprised of a lot of the same issues.

I do want to say that we are having to work overtime because of passports specifically. I got a text message from my chief right before the weekend saying that he was going to have someone work over the weekend because last week alone we got 30 passport cases that came in. We are kind of overwhelmed with passports. And, much like it has already been said, we have been told that, when people call the passport office, they are told to call your Congressperson. So, it feels as though we are doing the heavy lifting, and I do not want to beat up on you, but I do want to be real in this setting because this is what oversight is about. And, while I can appreciate advertising and telling people that this is the timeframe that it is taking, we have got emergencies that are arising as well.

Now, because I am in Dallas, my constituents do not have to travel far because we do have a location there that can help them same day. That has definitely proven to be really beneficial to my constituents. And I do want to say that they really do appreciate the help, and so I know that they would send you the type of love that I am about to read from one of my constituents, Shawn, because I want people to understand it is not just summer vacations, even though those are spiking as well. It is other opportunities. Shawn contacted us frantically. He contacted my office. He contacted me directly. He contacted another elected official because he really needed help with a passport. But, ultimately, he emailed me back, and he said, "My passport application had encountered unexpected delays, which left me uncertain about receiving it in time for a great academic achievement of my life, an internship in Oxford."

Oxford University. He was about to miss this because he could not get his passport. That is not something that everyone gets an opportunity to do. And so, I am excited that we were able to help him. He was excited that we were able to help him. But I do want you to understand truly the depths of the issues that exist as it relates to passports.

I am going to move on to Social Security, though, because something that really has not been highlighted is something that was

said by one of my colleagues from across the aisle, and I feel as if he was saying the quiet part out loud. He started talking about Social Security, and he started talking about life expectancy, and he talked about the fact that basically most people would die before they would ever get to Social Security. That is just summarizing it.

Do you remember that questioning?

OK. And so right now, he has a problem with Social Security because right now most people will live to see Social Security. So, essentially, we want to say that we are offering Social Security on paper, but we do not ever want to have to see a payout for that is what I got out of that questioning, and that is unfortunate.

And I am curious to know if my colleagues on the other side of the aisle are expressing this faux outrage about this because, when we look at the cuts that have been taken—and, in fact, that particular colleague was upset because there were not cuts to Social Security.

If I understand your testimony to be correct, you have testified that you have never been fully funded, or at least for the last—did you say 14 years?

Mr. POIST. That is correct. 14 of the last 25 years we have not received the President's budget request.

Ms. CROCKETT. So, you have not even been fully funded, and that particular colleague was upset about the fact that there is no negotiation that is going to take place about cutting the funding even more, but this does have real-life consequences.

I do have a constituent; we are working on her case right now. She is a mother of three small children. She reached out to our district office for help because she has been unable to work since August 2020 after an illness attacked her muscles and nervous system. She is also unable to drive, and some days even struggles to move. She applied for disability with the Social Security Administration, but is still waiting to hear back to get approved. And, because she has not heard back, she has reached out to various community organizations throughout my district to see if they can help her with rent and utilities.

This should not be the story of America, but I am alarmed when I hear people say the quiet part out loud. It seems like what we want to do is say: Hey, we are going to fight against you all because that is what we need to do for our constituents, but at the end of the day, if Social Security is not getting through the cases, guess what? That means that we are saving money because we are not getting money to people that really need that money.

And so, you know, I hope that my colleagues across the aisle take this seriously as we are about to endure a fight as relates to the budget. And, if we really do want to prioritize our shared constituencies, as our stories are the same on both sides of the aisle, and the solution that I have heard from each of you is funding, funding so that you can modernize.

Do I have that wrong?

Mr. POIST. That is correct. For Social Security, we need funding to hire staff, to maintain staff, to increase our IT investments, to fund our overtime to support our backlogs.

Ms. CROCKETT. So, if we are all having the same problems, it sounds like we all know what the solution is: fully fund your agencies. Thank you to your commitment to the people of the United States of America.

And, with that, I yield back.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentlewoman yields back her time.

I am going to yield myself time.

Thank you to each of you who were here. This is not my closing statement. I am sure we expect others to come.

Part of the discussion I would like to have, is there is a misnomer that I think we get wrong—you are entitled to answer it the way you do, but it is not unusual for reports to be heard in this city about some of the largest buildings that have Federal employees almost exclusively, but Federal employees. It has been reported that some 17 percent of employees, only 17 percent at one time or another reported to one of the major buildings here in Washington, DC, that were government workers.

Those are the kinds of things that fuel the questions about when do you go back to work, what is that percent. I do recognize, or at least I think I do, the State Department does need to be on the job for issuing a passport. That is kind of hard to do over the phone. But I would just say that that is what fuels some of the conversation on our side about not being at work because the reality is some of the companies that own these badges offer that feedback. Some people in this city have complained about—and we held a hearing on it—how the city of Washington needs to get Federal workers back to work because they are having problems economically not only in small business, but the need to do their job.

I would like to provide some feedback, if I can. There was a conversation that we had, Ambassador, where there was a conversation about online systems that were tried and evidently successful and now being looked at pending making that an online system. Good gosh, it seems like to me if it worked and you have got 12,000 people that said thank you, that that would be enough for the management of the organization to help us out, because primarily the people that we run across in Waco, Texas, and across central Texas already have passports. It seems like that they would be awesome candidates for that.

Next point. A good number of companies across this country, I could say American Express, I could say American Airlines, they have people who, when you log on, they have a system that says: May we call you back, rather than you waiting online. May we call you back? And the time—sometimes the times are not advantageous or something you can plan for, but can we call you back between 47 and 52 minutes?

Some of these same companies offer an opportunity for you to go online and actually engage a person who texts, what I would call text. It may be regular email, but it looks like texts to me, and they text back and forth to where you can see the conversation, ask a question, get the answer, ask for information. And it seemingly, to me, is a more effective way, not to somebody that is not computer literate. But someone who chooses to do this. And it seems like, to me, that there are other tasks which could be expanded from all three of your agencies.

Next point—if I were to count these out, I have probably have 15 of them, I admit. And it is just feedback from watching the process. People generally send it in, and they hear back, let us say, 10 weeks later. And many of the times, maybe most, maybe all, the passport does arrive by Fed Ex or UPS the day before they go. But, pending that, it may have taken three phone calls back and forth. There is bound to be a burden off that process that you have of somebody answering the phone. It seems like to me that there could be the identification of a cell phone, an address that you would have that would be available to where you could engage someone and say: “Hi. This is the passport office. You presented your passport on or about May the 25th. Please be advised that we anticipate it is going to be about 7 weeks. We are not trying to engage you. We are trying to keep you informed. Please do not respond back.”

And then, as that passport is being worked or maybe put in maybe a week before that you would get back to them, because a number of our work calls—once again, this is Texas, do not know everything—are repeat questions. Are you sure you got it? Is it going to come back? They have got this plane that is this Friday. Are they supposed to cancel the flight? They have got three children with them. What do they do with the one child if they—I mean, you can imagine the enormous questions that evolve from that.

My point is, is that if we—I think if you took into account some things that I think would be market based or that others do, I think your satisfaction would go up. I think your call volume would reduce. I think, even if you just texted back or called back—I would text—back to each congressional office and say, “Please advise your constituent,” then they would have a better contact. I am saying something, in my opinion, needs to be done that would reduce frustration and calls.

All right. I have gone past my time. I am sure I will get time again here in just a minute, but I want to just provide that feedback myself.

OK. The gentlewoman from Vermont, Ms. Balint, is recognized.

Ms. BALINT. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you all for being here. I am sure at this point you are feeling a little weary.

I want to just start by saying you just cannot get blood from a stone. That is what I am getting from this hearing here.

In 2017, then President Trump issued an executive order to freeze hiring across the government to reduce the Federal workforce. It was one of his very first actions after taking office. Although this order lasted just under 3 months, some Federal agencies experienced much longer hiring freezes. At the State Department, the hiring freeze lasted for 16 months.

So, Ms. Bitter, how many people did the State Department lose during the Trump Administration from policies to reduce the size of the Federal workforce, including hiring freezes?

Ms. BITTER. Thank you for the question.

I will zoom out a little bit and answer sort of globally what happened was absolutely we were recovering when the pandemic hit from those hiring freezes, and then we instituted more hiring freezes, putting us at 25 percent below where we had been in 2017.

So, to give you a sense—I am going to get these numbers a little bit wrong, but at the beginning of the last administration, I think there were probably around 1,450 people doing this work, and by the time we were able to begin hiring, there were just around 1,100.

Ms. BALINT. OK. So, you said a 25-percent decrease.

Ms. BITTER. We were at 25 percent deficit when we were able to begin hiring again.

Ms. BALINT. OK. Significant.

Ms. Bitter, how did staff attrition affect the State Department's ability to serve constituents? Just briefly, just tick them off, yes.

Ms. BITTER. Right. Thank you.

And I am just speaking just with respect to passport services. So, in addition to having much reduced staff, last year we received unprecedented demand for passport services, 22 million passport books and cards. This year we are experiencing, it will be probably 15 percent above that. We have been able to grow our staff by 10 percent. But, again, this accounts for the wait times that are longer than we would like.

Ms. BALINT. And is the staff attrition you have experienced easily reversible at this point?

Ms. BITTER. It takes a while to hire for national security positions. All of the people that work for us go through—the passport is the most important document that any American will hold and probably the most important document in the world for identity and citizenship. People go through rigorous screening to be able to work for us. And, even when we begin hiring, it does take time to bring people on board.

Ms. BALINT. And I imagine that losing significant staff also impacts institutional knowledge. Would you say?

Ms. BITTER. That is fair.

Ms. BALINT. And we do not just experience that in, you know, departments and state governments. That is true for any organization. Right? You lose institutional knowledge, you lose key relationships, and it impacts the work on a day-to-day basis in any work setting.

So, at this point, I ask unanimous consent to insert into the record a *New York Times* article that stated, quote, “President Trump’s politicalization of normally neutral positions and frequent criticism of his own bureaucracy hurt the public’s faith in government, the morale of employees who remain, and the prospects that a new generation will even enter public service,” end quote.

Ms. BALINT. The Trump Administration’s hiring freeze negatively affected welfare and morale for years. Even after it was lifted, the damage had been done. The Trump Administration’s misguided efforts to shrink Federal agencies caused a mass exodus of knowledge, as I was just talking about, and know-how from agencies responsible for helping regular Americans, providing disability benefits, supplemental security income, access to lifesaving care, resources for veterans, it goes on and on, and as we have heard so much in this hearing around passports and visas.

Mr. Poist, one of the most critical issues the Social Security Administration faces is the significant number of people waiting for

months, even years, for a decision on their disability application or appeal.

Would you agree with that?

Mr. POIST. That is correct. Currently people are waiting over 7 months for an initial disability decision.

Ms. BALINT. Seven months for an initial decision.

What is the root cause of your customer service challenges?

Mr. POIST. Mostly staffing in our State DDSs.

Ms. BALINT. So, like I said when I started, you cannot get blood from a stone. We have Americans suffering because we have starved government of the resources it needs to take care of our constituents, and then we sit here wringing our hands wondering why we are not meeting the needs of constituents. We have to pay for the staff to do this work. We need to make sure that those staff have the resources necessary to meet constituent needs. And, you know, this is not rocket science here. If you starve agencies, they cannot do the work.

Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentlewoman yields back her time.

The gentleman from California, Mr. Garcia, is recognized.

Mr. GARCIA. Thank you very much.

I want to thank all of you for your service. I know that it is very hard work, and I have constituents reach out to the Federal Government, not just in our district but across the country, every single day. I have been in Congress for about 6 months, and I have seen just the hard work that our Federal employees are doing every single day.

Right before I took this job, I was mayor of Long Beach, California, for 8 years. We had 6,000 hardworking municipal employees who I respected and uplifted through very difficult times, including during the pandemic. And I think it is important to remember that most folks are in government or working in government because they actually want to help people. And so, I think first it is really important to recognize that, yes, there is a lot of work to do in all of our departments, but we have hardworking people behind those desks and on the phones and out in the community working to make our country a better place and to provide the best services possible under sometimes very difficult budget conditions.

I personally have just been very impressed with just the level of feedback that we have received from working with a lot of the agencies across Federal Government. The passport and State Department issues have been brought up, which we are all aware of. I would also say that the response in helping us facilitate some of these difficult cases has been phenomenal in our office with passports. Yes, there is a huge challenge. We are very aware. We get the same emails and calls every day. But the response of those folks that are on the ground working with our office have been really something really great to see.

And so, I want to thank the team that are working on—the passport team and the team that is there based in L.A. and California helping us through our process. I do want to give, just to take this moment, a shoutout to both Bryan Bravo and Isaac Romero on my team in the district office that are working on the passport issue and all of these issues every single day and to the countless resi-

dents that are contacting us that we can assist, whether it is for passports, whether it is to help with Medicare and Social Security issues or the other issues that our constituents are facing.

And I think it is important, something I recognize that, you know, as mayor, it was all about the budget. It is all about ensuring that our agencies have enough to do the job that we are asking them to do.

Now, the Federal Government is on a completely different scale, and I am learning that every single day, but I also—you know, I think it is important as we talk about cuts and even some of the attacks I heard earlier about some of our agencies and the hard-working folks in them, that we have also been under—the last few years we have been trying to clean up what I view as a mess by former President Donald Trump and his sabotage efforts, quite frankly, against some of our departments.

If you look at the State Department, which we have been discussing, we had extremists within the Trump Administration constantly attacking the State Department and pushing back on any sort of additional support there as an agency.

So, I personally am proud of the Biden-Harris Administration, the work that they have done to rebuild and support our agencies. There is still a lot more work to do, in fact, a lot more support that has been needed, but there has been really good progress that has been made.

I want to note an executive order prioritizing customer service for those that rely on these services within the Biden-Harris Administration, and I want to quote the order. And that is delivering excellent, equitable, and secure Federal services and customer experience. And I think that really says it all. And I commend both the President and the Vice President for leading an Administration that is focused on people.

I also want to just make a quick note with the remaining time I have. Another great example of this that I have been reading about with my staff is the National Personnel Records Center, which is part of the National Archives and Records Administration, they have done a great program for military and Civil Service personnel record requests, and I know you guys have been involved in that.

Mr. Levins, briefly, can you just summarize for us in just this last minute the Administration's investments, as well as those from Congress, that have helped the National Personnel Records Center address veterans' records backlogs?

Mr. LEVINS. Thank you for your question.

Yes, Congress generously appropriated COVID relief funds for us, which we used to hire additional staff, contractors. Prior to the pandemic, our workforce did not have laptops. We used the funding to buy laptops. We also made information technology improvements to support the ingest of electronic records. The VA is digitizing records from our paper holdings, and we are able to now ingest those into our production system and work those using electronic delivery services to veterans instead of paper.

Mr. GARCIA. And I think it has been about a 50-percent reduction in the backlog of requests, approximately, and so I think—I just

commend you and your team overall for the work that has happened there.

And just, finally, I just want to thank all of our employees across all of our agencies for their hard work, and I hope we continue to invest not just in the departments but also in them and to constantly look at them in competitive marketplaces and that they are also being paid the fair wage that they deserve.

Thank you.

Mr. SESSIONS. The gentleman yields back his time.

I want to thank our witnesses and this Committee for their feedback to us that authorized and set up this hearing.

I want to thank our witnesses who have taken time to include us in their business decision-making. I want to thank them for their time and their study to come before this Subcommittee.

I hope you will take seriously every single Member who spoke today throughout the highs and throughout the lows of some of the personal attacks that were made. But I think that the truth of the matter is that we need to continue to work together.

All three of your specific agencies have been discussed on a regular basis by Members of this body. Much of the discussion is by people who were not here today because they are not part of this Committee, and we did not read them in. But that does not take away or diminish the need for us to be engaged with you, to speak with you, and to work with you.

So, I believe that you will hear the Ranking Member say here in a minute that he wishes to do exactly that. So, before we close today, I would like for Mr. Mfume to be able to offer his thanks to you also.

I think that it is important before you leave as our guests to say to you we would like to have you back. We would like to gain a perspective on the ideas that you heard today because I think each one of you received some bit of information and to find out how we can transmit to our colleagues and respond back, because I believe both Mr. Mfume and I do owe that to this body. We will write all of our Members. We will give them specific feedback. We will tell them what we have done, and we will also give them best wishes for the information which you provide us back about how you would like to take today's hearing.

So, Mr. Mfume, the gentleman is recognized.

Mr. MFUME. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

It has been several hours, so we all got through it together. I want to thank you again, as I said before, for convening this hearing. I want to thank the Members of this body who thought it was important enough to raise the issue, and, hence, here we are.

I really want to thank the three witnesses who have been here for, as I said before, several hours—Secretary Bitter, Deputy Commissioner Poist, and Director Levins. The information you have shared regarding the State Department, the NPRC, and Social Security will, I hope, go a long way at providing direction for all of us and for others who may visit these issues.

Allow me, if I might, just to kind of in my own mind summarize what I am walking away with here. It is clear to me that policies such as the hiring freeze that we have heard about over and over again contributed to some extent to this whole issue of a customer

service crisis. When you have got fewer people, you tend to do less work. And, if you are doing more work, you do not have those people for long because they get burned out. I think my colleague said something about getting blood out of a rock. We have just got to recognize that workers have limits. They are going to do all that they can do and should do, and we ought to all hold them to that. But because we have an ever growing population in this country, I mean, it is just booming, we have got to at some point realize that we cannot allocate the previous amount of resources to a mountain that is growing, crying out for help. We know that staff attrition, no matter how much we target it, cannot be quickly reversed. It takes a minute, as I have heard from some of you say today, to allocate resources to deal with Social Security's backup, with the backup at the State Department. Whether it is training a new person to be a passport adjudicator or a disability claims examiner, it takes a minute.

And so, while we are looking at attrition and while we certainly believe that we ought to find a way to fund what you are doing, the real truth of the matter is it is going to take us a little bit of time to dig out of this hole. And, Ms. Bitter, I think I heard you say earlier that it will be the end of the calendar year until we get back to pre-pandemic levels.

So that is the reality, and that is on us to be able to share it with our colleagues here. There is no magic wand or silver bullet. There is going to be just a lot of good, determined effort, I hope, at supporting our Federal workforce.

I do know that the Biden-Harris Administration and Democrats are committed to assuring that agencies that serve the public are indeed funded by investing in them and in the workers and the technologies, all of which hopefully at the end of the day will put customers first. And providing the resources that these agencies need for what we should call optimal staffing levels and to acquire updated technology to improve how the government can deliver those services to our constituents has to be priority No. 1.

I said earlier that the National Archives is a good example of how leadership and Congress together prioritize improving government services by championing an investment from the Technology Modernization Fund to help eliminate the veterans' records request backlog and to have that done by the end of the year. And I know vets all over this country who hear this, hopefully will know that there is some real help on the way.

The other thing for me is that I have never considered telework to be the problem. I have always considered it to be a bridge to get to where we want to be. And, because of the pandemic, which we sort of overtalked about and referenced, there were delays and backlogs that brought about the need to telework. We were teleworking here in the U.S. Congress for committee hearings for well over a year. So, I understand it is not ideal, but it does not necessarily equate to poor quality if and when it is done right and overseen in the sort of way that makes sense. In fact, telework in many instances is a solution for avoiding increased backlogs and fostering some sort of continuity of work.

We know that those backlogs, as has been said earlier, are attributable to a number of things; medical records as we spoke about

earlier, retention and recruitment, attrition, and probably three or four other things that I cannot think of and has not come up today, not to mention the little things that break up continuity of work, like emergencies and inclement weather and all sorts of other things.

So, there is a lot to be taken into consideration. I am going to certainly continue to urge my colleagues on this Committee on both sides of the aisle to follow the path that we are on. It is a path of bipartisanship and hopefully trying to find a way to deal with an issue that affects all of us. It does not mean that any Member of this Congress cannot express themselves. It is just that, at the end of the day, we are searching for consensus, because most people are not on the left or the right. Most are in the middle. We are trying to govern from there, and to govern effectively, we have got to make sure that everyone is heard, but, at the end of the day that there is real progress, that there is a real effort to alleviate these problems that constituents are crying out about.

You heard over and over again from Members of Congress about how they are approached in the street and at church and in community hearings by constituents who just feel like they are helpless, that agencies do not hear them, that they are put on hold and nobody cares. That is a painful thing when you do not have the ability to correct that yourself. If everybody was a Member of Congress, we would not have the problem, but we should not be the ones that have to rattle the cages to bring about good service for the people who need it most.

So, Mr. Chairman, I am going to conclude there.

I do have and would ask unanimous consent that two statements be entered into the record. A statement from the Social Security Administration, it is the AFL-CIO's American Federation of Government Employees that developed this, and I also have the statement about the Department of State's passport backlogs from the National Federation of Federal Employees that represent about 110,000 individuals. AFG represents about three-quarters of a million people. And as I said once on the floor, Federal workers are everywhere. They are not just in Washington, DC.

Mr. SESSIONS. Without objection, they will be entered into the record.

Mr. MFUME. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I will yield back.

I want to thank, again, the witnesses for participating today.

Mr. SESSIONS. Mr. Mfume, I want to thank you very much. We all have our own sayings. You have heard them today. I spent 16 years vigorously in the free enterprise system, and we had a saying that by and large was, either it works or it does not work. If it is working, you are OK. But if it is not working, you have got to continue to do something different. And I think today you had an opportunity to receive feedback. I think it is important for you to listen to us, and we wait to hear back from you. I would like to engage each of you individually on the feedback from what you have heard from us today that I think came from both sides of the aisle.

With that said, without objection, all Members will have five legislative days within which to submit materials and to submit addi-

tional written questions for the witnesses, which will be forwarded to the witnesses for their response.

At this time, I see no other requests for time. So, without objection, the Subcommittee stands adjourned.

Thank you very much.

[Whereupon, at 5:10 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]