

CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

STATEMENT BY

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BEFORE THE HOUSE SOCIAL SECURITY SUBCOMMITTEE ON

ON

STRENGTHENING SOCIAL SECURITY'S CUSTOMER SERVICE

MAY 17, 2022

(Y)

Chairman Larson and Members of the Social Security Subcommittee:

On behalf of the American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO (AFGE) which represents over 700,000 federal employees at over 70 different agencies, including approximately 43,000 employees at the Social Security Administration (SSA), I thank you for holding this important hearing on improving Social Security's customer service.

In order to accomplish and maintain excellent customer service, AFGE makes two fundamental recommendations to this Committee. First, Congress should adequately fund SSA, starting with appropriation of \$16.1 billion in Fiscal Year 2023. Second, Congress should use its funding, legislative, and oversight powers to ensure that SSA gives its frontline employees a voice and works with them to improve and sustain customer service.

SSA's workers are on the front lines in serving the public and helping them get their benefits. Unfortunately, due to underfunding and dismal labor relations, morale among this workforce is very low. Workers face exhaustion from extreme workloads and are disillusioned with a hostile management that ignores their workplace concerns. Numerous government employee satisfaction surveys have found SSA to be among the worst federal agencies to work for. Attached to this submission we highlight some results from the most recent survey, the third government-wide "Employee Voice" pulse survey. Out of 25 federal agencies surveyed, SSA consistently ranked at or near the bottom. This has made recruitment and retention very difficult, and it follows that employee satisfaction affects customer service. To achieve sustained improvement in customer service, it will be critical to restore morale and dedicate resources to recruitment and retention of SSA workers.

Congress should appropriate \$16.1 billion in FY 23. The SSA has faced years of underfunding. The agency's administrative funding for basic operations fell by more than 14 percent from 2010 to 2022, after accounting for inflation. From 2010 to 2021, SSA's workforce was reduced by approximately 8,500 full-time, permanent workers or 1 in 8 employees and 67 field offices have closed. Meanwhile, the workload is set to increase as nearly twenty million Americans reach retirement age over the next decade. While SSA received a modest funding bump in real dollars for FY 22, the increase failed to keep up with inflation. \$16.1 billion in FY 23 funding is needed for the agency to begin to strengthen its workforce, update its computer systems and improve its customer service.

Additional funding would help SSA keep open field offices in communities that need them. It could allow for effective recruitment, relocation, and retention flexibilities and incentives. It could allow SSA to begin to update its antiquated computer systems and to again mail out earnings statements to every American. Additionally, SSA is currently one of the only federal agencies to lack a student loan repayment program. For around \$8 million a year, SSA could begin to bring its benefits in line with other federal agencies. Legal Assistants support the hearings and work of Administrative Law Judges, but many have been forced to perform duties beyond their grade. Increased funding could allow SSA to ensure Legal Assistants are correctly classified for the work they do.

Congress should also use its funding, legislative and oversight powers to ensure that SSA gives its frontline employees a voice and works with them to improve customer service. SSA should reopen its contract, which was forced on the workers without input under the previous commissioner, and bargain in good faith with its employees. Utilizing telework would not only improve worker morale, recruitment and retention, but it also increases productivity and keeps vulnerable elderly and disabled safer as the Covid-19 pandemic continues Additionally, creating a national level union-management workgroup could help foster better labor relations. Problems with reopening the collective bargaining contract and ongoing labor-management issues require regular inquiry and oversight from Congress.

Thank you for hosting this hearing on improving Social Security's customer service. We look forward to working with the Committee to achieve this important goal and address underlying issues that present opportunities for improvement. If you have further questions about any of these issues, please contact Jeff Cruz at <u>jeff.cruz@afge.org.</u>

Sincerely,

Julie N. Tippens Director of Legislation

Attachment 1 SSA's rankings on worker satisfaction:

25th out of 25

Gov't-Wi	de Response Respo	onse by Question	Response by Theme	Response by Component	Agency Response Rates	Agency Response Distribution	Component Response Distribution	Agency F Trends
	Satisfactio		ion					
Pulse Date Mar 2022		Question ment - I feel exhausted	in the morning at the tho	ught of another workday.				•
1-Strongly Disa	agree	2-:	Somewhat Disagree	3-N4	eutral	4-Somewhat Agree		5-Strongly Agree
SSA	14.2%	11.4%	15.3%		26.7%		32.4%	
USAID	11.5%	14.4%	13.7%		34.6%		25.7%	
VA	15.3%	12.9%	14.49	i .	31.8%		25.6%	
VA								
DHS	19.4%		14.9%	17.9%	26.5	96	21.3%	

24^{th} out of 25

						5		
< Ga	t-Wide Response Response by Question		Response by Theme	Response by Component	Agency Response Rates	Agency Response Distribution	Component Response Distribution	Agency F Trends
Age	ncy Satisfa	ction Distribı	ition					
Pulse D Mar 20		Theme/Question Engagement - If I found a jo	belsewhere with more workpla	ce flexibilities or remote opti	ons, I would take it.			•
1-Stron	gly Disagree		2-Somewhat Disagree	3-Neutra	I	4-Somewhat Agree		5-Strongly Agree
HUD	10.6%	9.0%	17.9%	18.5%		44.1%		
SSA	14.49	6 7.7%	17.4%	18.3%		42.2%		
DHS	14.29	6 9.2%	19.5%	19.6	5%	37.5%	,	
NRC	14.49	6 10.9%	16.5%	20.99	%	37.4%	5	
VA	14.59	6 9.5%	18.6%	20.4	1%	37.09	5	
DOD	14.59	6 10.5%	20.1%		20.4%	34.	5%	

23rd out of 25

Agency	y Satisf	faction Dis	tribution			
Pulse Date		Theme/Question				
Mar 2022	•	Reentry - I have th	resources I need to effectively	do my job within current return-to-work arrangements.		•
1-Strongly Dis	sagree		2-Somewhat Disagree	3-Neutral	4-Somewhat Agree	5-Strongly Agre
DOJ	6.6%	9.7%	13.0%	31.1%	39.6%	
DOT	4.8%	9.4%	15.3%	31.6%	38.8%	
GOV	6.4%	10.1%	14.6%	30.3%	38.6%	
DOC	8.6%	10.7%	15.8%	29.0%	35.8%	
DHS	8.1%	10.6%	16.4%	29.1%	35.7%	
TREASURY	7.1%	10.0%	15.5%	31.7%	35.7%	
STATE	6.8%	12.1%	10.9%	35.2%	34.9%	
VA	7.6%	11.4%	17.7%	29.8%	33.5%	
SSA	11.69	% 13.	0% 14.2%	27.9%	33.2%	
USAID	6.6%	11.3%	13.2%	40.6%	28.5%	
HUD	9.2%	13.5%	20.3%	29.3%	27.7%	

*No data is shown for an agency if fewer than 10 respondents selected any option.

24th out of 25

Pulse Date Mar 2022		/Question ry - I trust agency le	eadership to do wh	nat's right to protect em	ployees' health, safety, and wellbeing.			•
1-Strongly Di	lisagree		2-Somewhat Di	isagree	3-Neutral	4-Somewhat Agree	2	5-Strongly Agre
GOV	10.6%	12.5%	12.1%	5	32.3%	32.4%		
DOJ	12.3%	13.8%	11.6%		31.9%		30.4%	
DOI	8.3%	11.9%	12.1%		37.8%		29.9%	
USDA	9.5%	12.9%	14.5%		33.7%		29.4%	
DOC	12.6%	13.7%	13.7% 11.9%		33.1%		28.8%	
NRC	13.9%	14.8	14.8% 10.6%		33.5%		27.3%	
DHS	16.9%	14.3% 12.4%		29.2%		27.2%		
STATE	6.6%	15.1%	11.3%		40.2%		26.9%	
VA	12.7%	15.2%	6	13.7%	31.9%		26.6%	
SSA	16.7%		15.2%	13.1%	29.4%		25.6%	
HUD	15.7%		16.6%	14.6%	29.7%		23.4%	

*No data is shown for an agency if fewer than 10 respondents selected any option.

23rd out of 25

Agency	Satisfaction						
Mar 2022		load is reasonable.					•
1-Strongly Disa	gree	2-Somewhat	Disagree	3-Neutral	4-Some	what Agree	5-Strongly Agr
DOC	11.2%	15.9%	11.9%		33.3%	27.6%	
EPA	11.7%	15.9%	11.8%		34.0%	26.5%	
USDA	13.3%	16.4%	12.8%		31.0%	26.4%	
NRC	12.5%	17.8%	10.3%		33.4%	25.9%	
VA	15.2%	16.2%	13.2%		29.8%	25.6%	
STATE	15.1%	17.5%	10.9%		31.2%	25.2%	
ED	15.8%	15.8%	9.5%		34.1%	24.8%	
DOI	14.5%	18.3%	13.4%	6	29.6%	24.3%	
SSA	24.5%		16.9%	12.4%	24.6%	21.5%	
NSF	15.8%	23.4%		8.7%	31.0%	21.2%	
USAID	24.2%		19.5%	11.0%	28.6%	16.7%	