



COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS AND THE
FEDERAL WORKFORCE
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STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

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DEPUTY COMMISSIONER FOR BUDGET, FINANCE, AND
MANAGEMENT

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

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

Thank you for inviting me to discuss the status of customer service at the Social Security Administration (SSA). I am Chad Poist, SSA's Deputy Commissioner for Budget, Finance, and Management.

Service delivery and customer service are core to SSA's mission, and have been throughout our long history. Every day we work to provide Social Security's programs and services to the diverse populations we serve by improving the customer experience. We strive to provide people with the benefits and services they have earned and need, including resuming access to all in-person services for those who had difficulty reaching us during the pandemic.

We face significant challenges to restore service delivery to the standards that the public, Congress, and we expect. In particular, we continue to combat a growing backlog of disability claims, long wait times for phone service on our National 800 Number, staffing challenges, and other resource limitations.

Our Agency and Programs

SSA programs and services are critical to the public, and the scope of our work is enormous. We operate approximately 1,200 field offices, 162 hearing offices, 24 teleservice centers, 8 processing centers, and support offices nationwide.

For more than 85 years, SSA has provided income protection for retirees, individuals with disabilities, and families that lose a wage-earner. Almost 90 percent of seniors over the age of 65 receive Social Security benefits. In FY 2022, we paid more than one trillion dollars in benefits to over 70 million Social Security beneficiaries and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients. We also support other programs such as Medicare, Medicaid, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

In FY 2022, we:

- Completed nearly 6.5 million claims for retirement benefits;
- Paid benefits to 73 million Social Security beneficiaries and SSI recipients;
- Posted over 294 million earnings items to workers' records;
- Processed nearly 16 million original and replacement Social Security card applications;
- Processed nearly 370 million online transactions;
- Served over 13 million visitors in our field offices;
- Answered 27 million phone calls to our National 800 Number; and
- Completed nearly 600,000 full medical continuing disability reviews and 2.2 million non-medical redeterminations of eligibility, safeguarding the integrity of our benefit programs.

Strengthening Customer Service As We Emerge from the Pandemic

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 direct our employees to work from home and to limit in-person service to critical situations by appointment only. This decision, while difficult, allowed us to keep our employees and the public safe while continuing to deliver critical services.

We also took measures to improve customer experience and ensure business continuity and resiliency, including expanding remote hearing options to hold disability hearings via telephone and Microsoft Teams video for customers who chose those options. Expanding digital services and self-serve options helped to improve experience for many customers, while also preventing further deterioration of wait times for those who prefer to connect with us in-person and over the phone.

We successfully reopened our offices to walk-in traffic and expanded in-person services in April 2022. We evaluated our reentry efforts from March 30, 2022, through September 30, 2022 to assess the timeliness and quality of our services, program stewardship, experiences of our customers and employees, and the impact on the environment. The results from the evaluation indicate that many of our efforts were successful. For example, data showed significant increases in the use of online and telephone service, even after we resumed walk-in service. Specifically, about 60 percent of eligible Social Security benefit claims were filed online during the reentry period, up from about 50 percent in FY 2019. Additionally, in surveys we found that customers report high levels of satisfaction with our in-person service, a testament to the quality and service of our employees when they interact with the public. Our mission remains at the forefront of our operational decision-making, and we will use these evaluation results, along with continued monitoring of key public service metrics, to continue to improve our customer experience and service delivery model.

Expanding in-person service, however, does not alleviate the significant challenges we face to restore service delivery to the standards the public expects and deserves.

Initial Disability Backlogs

One of the most critical issues we face is the significant number of people who are waiting too long—over seven months on average—for a disability decision. Customers appealing initial claims decisions wait another seven months, on average, for reconsideration decisions.

These delays are largely concentrated in our State disability determination service (DDS) offices, which make the medical determinations for our initial disability claims, reconsiderations, and medical continuing disability reviews. Wait times increased during the pandemic, as the DDSs had less access to recent medical evidence due to reduced doctor visits and a shortage of consultative examination providers, as well as record high attrition among DDS employees. This year we plan to replace all DDS staffing losses and increase total DDS staff with around 2,100 new hires. Last year, we launched a special team dedicated to improving DDS operations, particularly increasing processing capacity and reducing time claimants spend waiting for consultative examinations.

To increase DDS processing capacity, we have been deploying cadres of technical experts from SSA to help work down the backlogs. These groups are already beginning to demonstrate results; so far this fiscal year they have completed nearly 20,000 cases more than the DDS would have been able to process without the additional capacity. We are also working with the DDSs to implement new strategies for employee recruitment and retention, including encouraging States to increase the competitiveness of DDS pay, improving training, and reducing onboarding time. To reduce the time claimants spend waiting for consultative examination appointments, we continue to recruit new providers and issued guidance permitting telehealth for certain consultative exams. To reduce the time spent waiting for medical and psychological consultant sign-off, we established a national contract for these consultants to supplement States' contracts.

It will take time, however, to see improvement in our service delivery metrics. In FY 2023, we expect to process 130,000 more initial disability claims compared to FY 2022. Starting in FY 2024, when our new hires complete training and become more proficient in processing claims, they will be able to help reduce backlogs.

Telephone Service on our National 800 Number

Our National 800 Number is a critical service channel, as millions of customers successfully use our telephone service as a primary method of contacting us. However, some callers have experienced busy signals, long waits, and dropped calls. These problems with our outdated phone technology and our interim telephone system frustrate the public and our employees. Hiring challenges and high attrition have also impacted service.

Prior to the pandemic, our outdated phone system was slated for transition to a modern telecommunications platform. However, when the pandemic redirected in-person service to telephone service, we had to put in place an interim telephone system to answer calls outside 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 or a call-back feature.

We are addressing our service delivery challenges by increasing hiring, improving retention efforts, and transitioning to a modern telecommunications platform in FY 2023. We expect that these efforts will help us improve service and decrease wait times to speak to a representative.

Once our new hires are fully trained and productive, and with successful implementation of our new telecommunication platform, we anticipate noticeable improvement in our wait times and total calls handled beginning in FY 2024. For instance, based on the FY 2024 President's Budget, we plan to reduce wait times by over 40 percent from 35 minutes in FY 2023 to 20 minutes in FY 2024, and reduce our busy rate from 15 percent in FY 2023 to 3 percent in FY 2024.

We look forward to updating you on our progress to improve our 800 Number in the near future.

Digital Service Enhancements

Technology is another important tool to improve customer experience.

Modernizing and expanding our digital services improves the customer experience by providing convenient, secure self-service methods for doing business with SSA, for those who prefer these options. It also shortens wait times for those who need or prefer to connect with us in-person and over the phone.

Some of our recent accomplishments in digital services and IT modernization include:

- Online *my Social Security* transactions grew from 108 million in FY 2018 to 273 million in FY 2022, averaging about a 25 percent increase each year. We are on track to surpass 340 million transactions this year. 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 launched our redesigned ssa.gov website in December 2022. After incorporating user feedback, many of our most visited pages now have a more user-friendly and task-based approach that provides customers with a clear path to the tasks they need to accomplish.
- We are expanding our ability to offer more services online, and we are deploying an enterprise scheduling system that currently supports the ability for the public to self-schedule certain appointments, and that will ultimately support customer self-scheduling for additional services in the future. We are also saving people time waiting in our offices by allowing them to begin certain actions online rather than completing the entire action in person.
- Our Internet Social Security Number Replacement Card (iSSNRC) service allows customers to request a no-change replacement Social Security card online in most States, and request a replacement card for name change due to marriage in certain States. We processed about 3 million iSSNRC transactions in FY 2022, which is more than double the FY 2019 number.
- During the pandemic, we expanded remote hearing options to hold disability hearings via telephone and Microsoft Teams video for customers who chose those options. Even post-pandemic, these remote options have proven a strong success with our customers; so far in FY 2023, more than 80 percent of our customers have chosen to participate in their hearings by phone or video.

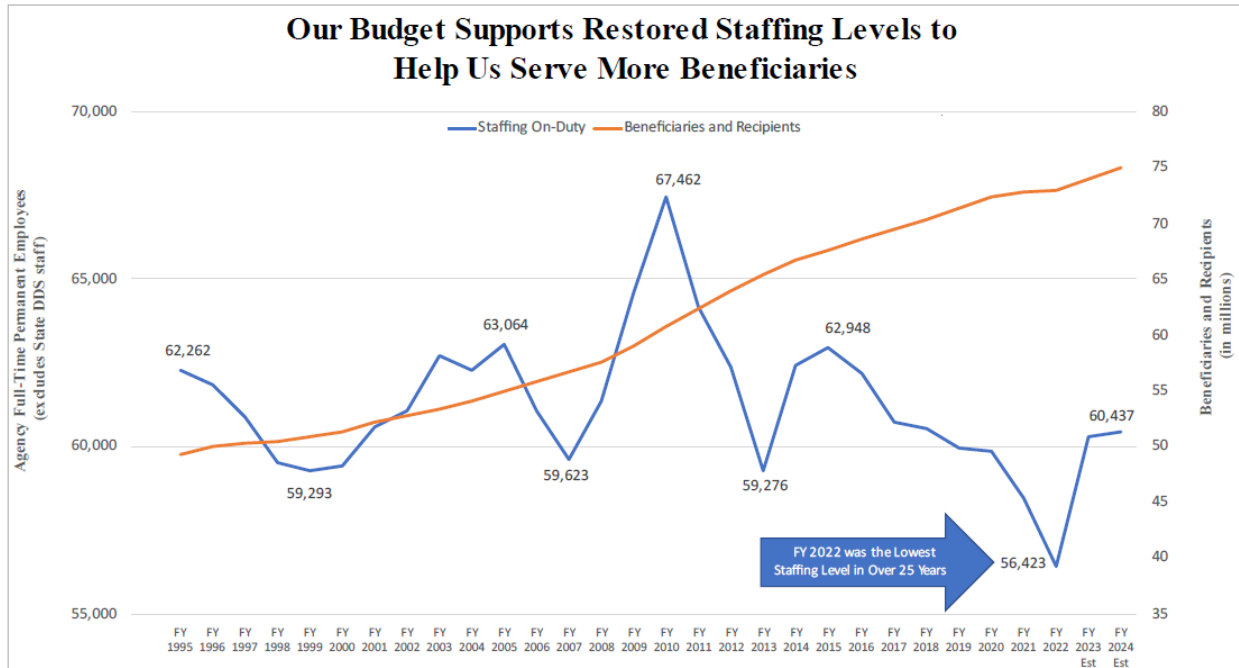
While online services and technology improvements are critical, online service delivery still depends on employees to process the applications and conduct follow-up interviews.

Critical Resource Needs

Our dedicated employees are doing their part to restore and improve service while working within our current funding levels. Each day our employees serve field office visitors, answer questions and take claims on the phone, hold hearings, pay benefits, and complete countless other workloads. We are proud to deliver strong customer service to the best of our ability. Building the capacity to meet the public's expectations for timely customer service requires sustained and sufficient funding and staffing levels.

We are a customer-facing agency administering complex programs, which requires sufficient staff to keep up with the demand for our services. After years of tight budgets, in FY 2022 we hit our lowest staffing level in 25 years—around 56,000 full-time permanent employees, down from a high of over 67,000 in FY 2010 (Figure 1). Meanwhile, the number of beneficiaries and recipients we serve has increased to over 70 million. That is an increase of over 8 million beneficiaries over the last decade, at the same time as our staffing level was declining to its lowest level in 25 years. We simply do not have enough staff to complete our growing workloads and serve all the customers who need our help.

Figure 1.



Our budget directly drives the level of customer service the public receives from us, and new hires are necessary to begin to reduce growing backlogs and improve service. With the funding we received in FY 2023, we are beginning to rebuild our workforce. Compared to FY 2022, this year we expect to complete around 50,000 more retirement claims, 2 million more SSN requests, and almost 130,000 more initial disability claims, and to handle 2 million more National 800 Number calls.

We are making progress with our hiring, even as tight labor markets make it challenging to retain experienced employees and attract talented new ones. This fiscal year through May 20, we have made more than 2,000 net gains in our full-time permanent workforce, and we expect further gains due to the positive effects of direct hiring authority. Most new hires are in direct customer service positions. We expect that starting in FY 2024 as new hires become more proficient, they will help us reduce growing backlogs and improve service to the public.

The 2024 President’s Budget request of \$15.5 billion for our administrative expenses is crucial to helping us restore staffing to handle increasing workloads, continue to modernize technology, and reduce backlogs and long waits. Since most of our hires in FY 2023 will start later in the fiscal year, part of our FY 2024 requested increase includes their full-year costs in FY 2024.

Conclusion

Providing high-quality and timely service to the public is central to our mission. While we face multiple challenges to restore service delivery to the standards both we and the public expect, we are working diligently to do so within our resource constraints. We are working to reduce wait times for disability decisions, modernizing our National 800 Number, and rebuilding our workforce. These efforts—if supported with sustained funding and sufficient staffing—will put us on the path to significantly improve our essential service delivery to the public in the coming years.

We appreciate your support and look forward to continuing to work with you.