



**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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Committee Chair Sessions, Ranking Member Mfume, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting me to discuss telework at the Social Security Administration (SSA). I am Hank McNelly, Executive Counselor to the Commissioner. Prior to being selected for this position in October 2020, I served in the U.S. Army on active duty for over 23 years where I provided critical and time-sensitive policy and legal advice to senior Department of Defense officials. Given its vital mission, I am honored to continue my career of public service at SSA. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the impact of telework on our mission, including how our ability to telework allows us to deliver services to the public. For over 20 years, SSA has supported various types of telework for agency employees based on telework agreements that each employee establishes with their supervisors and consistent with agency policy.

Background

SSA programs and services are vital to the public, and the scope of our work is enormous. For more than 85 years, SSA has provided income security for retirees, individuals with disabilities, and families that lose a wage-earner. Almost 90 percent of workers over the age of 65 receive Social Security benefits. In fiscal year (FY) 2023, we paid more than one trillion dollars in benefits to over 71 million Social Security beneficiaries and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients.

In FY 2023, we:

- Served almost 30 million visitors in our field offices;
- Handled about 30 million phone calls to our National 800 Number;
- Processed over 400 million online transactions;
- Posted about 304 million earnings items to workers' records;
- Processed over 18 million original and replacement Social Security card applications;
- Completed almost 6.7 million claims for retirement benefits; and
- Completed 2.5 million non-medical redeterminations of eligibility and over 550,000 full medical continuing disability reviews, safeguarding the integrity of our benefit programs.

We could not accomplish this work without strong performance management and accountability.

We are a public-facing organization with a nationwide network of approximately 1,200 field offices, 162 hearing offices, 24 teleservice centers, 8 processing centers, and 10 regional offices. Our headquarters is in Woodlawn, Maryland and we have a small headquarters office in Washington, DC. The vast majority of our employees work in frontline positions and report onsite each week. Field office staff, who serve our customers in-person, work onsite most of the time.

Telework at SSA

We have had telework to some degree at our agency for over 20 years, and our telework policy is the same now as it was before the pandemic. We use telework where it supports our mission. We know that many people rely on our in-person services, and we strive to provide people with the benefits and services they have earned and need. This includes expanding access to in-person services for those who had difficulty reaching us during the pandemic. Our workplace and personnel policies are designed to strengthen our ongoing delivery of services to the public. We resumed walk in traffic in our local Social Security offices in April 2022. Since that time, employees have been working a combination of onsite work and telework to meet the evolving needs of the public. At SSA, telework is not – and has never been – one size fits all. Rather, it is based on business needs.

Before the pandemic, it was not unusual for employees to telework regularly or for employees to have their laptops at home in anticipation of weather or other emergency-required telework days. As technology advances, it opens opportunities to improve service. Gone are the days of having to mail cumbersome paper folders between our offices as claims make their way through the appeals process, or as we need to transfer work to balance service. Our ability to move work electronically and provide seamless service allows us to operate more efficiently, and has been critical during emergencies. In fact, we built a virtual private network (VPN) into our infrastructure initially for Continuity of Operations Planning purposes. In 2015, we replaced all agency desktop computers with laptops so that our employees could work even when they could not report onsite.

This advancement proved itself when the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020, forcing most of our employees to work from home. We were able to quickly move our workforce to mandatory evacuation telework status by utilizing long-standing telework practices, and by capitalizing on previous strategic investments in our information technology infrastructure. Thus, we were able to securely continue critical public service at one of the most difficult times in our nation's history.

We were even able to expand some service options. For example, our hearing offices quickly began offering voluntary telephone hearings, and we rolled out online video hearings using software that allows our administrative law judges, claimants, and claimant representatives to participate in a hearing from any private location using a smartphone, tablet, or computer. Today, 80 percent of our claimants continue to prefer and voluntarily elect a hearing without having to travel to our offices. This is a major shift, and we are ensuring that people can choose the option that works best for them.

Certain workloads continued to require onsite work. For example, we must conduct face-to-face interviews and review original evidence to process Social Security Number cards and some applications for benefits. We also needed to be in our offices to open mail and scan mailed documents into our systems.

Current Policy

Our telework policy prioritizes customer service. In accordance with the Telework Act of 2010, our telework program provides workplace flexibility that enables mission-critical services to the public and continuity of operations during emergencies. Agency leadership determines which positions are telework-eligible and the telework frequency based on the nature of the position and to best serve the public's needs. Our teleworking practices, policies, and bargaining agreements guide management in determining the appropriate workplace flexibilities to accomplish their component mission efficiently and effectively within the boundaries of Federal law, regulation, and Office of Personnel Management guidance. Currently all but about 1,000 of SSA's career employees are eligible for telework. Employees in frontline direct service positions, which account for 75 percent of our workforce, have been regularly reporting to the office since April 2022.

Our employees are in-office to provide the in-person services our customers expect, and we allow telework when workloads do not require face to face interactions to complete. For example, our 26,000 field office employees, who see the public in person, report onsite at least three days a week. On these days, they handle in-person appointments and see walk-ins to take benefit applications, issue Social Security Number Cards, or provide assistance to people who are already receiving benefits. They examine the evidence the individuals provide and enter essential information into our systems. On the one or two days per week that these employees telework, they perform work out of public view, such as processing applications and obtaining additional evidence. Additionally, most of our appointments for benefit applications are conducted by phone, which allows offices to support each other to provide the fastest service to the public. This is the work our employees do while teleworking.

To ensure we have the flexibility to meet the needs for in-person service, our managers can change or terminate telework schedules, suspend telework in advance of the workday, or recall employees to the office the same day.

To help supervisors support teleworking employees, we have developed a variety of resources and required training for all teleworkers. Our policy and negotiated labor agreements require all telework-eligible employees to formally agree to the terms of our telework agreement. These agreements include detailed provisions, such as maintaining the same hours of duty when on telework or in the office, and requiring the use of (and responding timely) to instant messages, email, and video and phone calls.

Managing performance

We have long-standing service metrics and management information systems that capture our incoming, pending, and completed workloads, which managers use to monitor employee performance and to ensure we are handling the public's work within available resources, no matter where they work. With modern technologies—instant messaging, email, and video

meetings—managers communicate with employees in real-time and often face-to-face throughout the day. Managers assign work, use workload reports, case clearances, project deliverables—the same methods for tracking work onsite—when monitoring employees during telework. Managers can tell when employees are away from their laptops for extended periods, so we can address individual performance concerns quickly. Managers are expected to utilize performance tools and counseling to address employee performance issues. We apply this performance management processes to employees regardless of where they are working.

Going forward, we continue to evaluate the right mix of hybrid work that provides responsive public service while also attracting and retaining the best possible employees, and we will consider how in-person presence affects office space needs. We cannot ignore that telework provides a tremendous opportunity for SSA to be competitive in the modern job market, which is essential if we are to hire and retain top talent to provide high-quality service to the American people. Keep in mind that even without telework, given our nationwide structure, our employees frequently work with other employees who are in a different physical location. This flexibility also allows for talent-sharing across the nation. However, we are still learning about how telework will ultimately affect our employees and work. To capitalize on the benefits of being together in person, the Acting Commissioner has decided to increase the onsite presence in headquarters offices for managers and supervisors.

Critical Resource Challenges

Our budget directly drives the level of customer service we can deliver. 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. Building the capacity to meet the public’s expectations for timely customer service requires sustained and sufficient funding and staffing levels.

Because resources are so critical to improving service, the Administration is requesting a \$727 million continuing resolution (CR) anomaly for FY 2024 that would bring SSA to an annualized funding level of \$14.854 billion. Annualized funding at the anomaly level would help avoid significant service degradation resulting from a full-year hiring freeze and build on the progress made in FY 2023 to restore staffing levels necessary to improve service after a 25-year staffing low at the end of FY 2022.

Conclusion

As stated earlier, the vast majority of our employees work in frontline positions and report onsite each week. We are positioning our workforce so that we can meet the public where they are – this includes ensuring our field and hearing offices are staffed to meet our demand for in-person services. Telework decisions cannot stand alone. Rather, we must consider facts like the evolution of how the public is choosing to engage with us, how to best connect our employees with our mission, what it will take to retain and recruit top talent, the resources needed to

maintain space that we could better use for hiring and training, and—above all—how these and other factors help us serve the public.

During the COVID-19 health emergency, it is not an understatement to say telework allowed us to protect the public and our employees while continuing critical workloads. Now we must examine lessons learned and continued experience and refine and enhance data collection to drive mission outcomes. We will continue to evaluate feedback from customers, employees, and stakeholders to shape our work environment.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.