



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Hearing Statement of Senator Max Baucus (D-Mont.)
Regarding the Social Security Administration and Improving Service
As prepared for delivery

President Kennedy once said, "A Nation's strength lies in the well-being of its people."

No federal program touches more American lives and benefits more American families than Social Security. Next year, the Social Security Administration will pay benefits to almost 60 million Americans.

Today we will examine the agency's performance delivering benefits to workers and their families, and its role saving taxpayer dollars. This is not a hearing about Social Security solvency. We will hear from the Commissioner of the Social Security Administration, Michael Astrue.

Commissioner Astrue, during your confirmation hearing before this Committee in 2007, you committed to reduce the disability hearings backlog. Today we will evaluate the result. At the beginning of last year, more than 771,000 people were waiting for a hearing. This is higher than when you started your term. I expect to hear why the backlog grew, and what the agency is doing to address it.

Michael Clouse, who lives in my hometown of Helena, Montana, needs this backlog to be fixed. He has spent years trying to work through the red tape.

Mike is a 55 year-old army veteran, and his service didn't end when he retired from the military. Mike volunteers with the American Legion and the Disabled American Veterans, helping other veterans find transportation to hospitals across Montana. But his health problems make it tough for him to volunteer or do other work.

During a military training exercise years ago, a tank next to him accidentally fired. Mike's back broke in the accident, and ever since, he's suffered from chronic pain.

Mike worked in heating and plumbing before joining the military. He was working as an Employment Specialist with the Montana Department of Labor Job Service in 2004 when his disabilities became too much.

He had to leave his job, and he applied for benefits shortly thereafter. Mike's waited since 2005 for his benefits. He's been shuttled between various Social Security offices and his paperwork has gotten lost.

Mike and his wife Teese had to sell their home in Butte to be closer to his hospital in Helena. They couldn't take the physical demands and costs of traveling.

Teese, who is his caregiver, went back to work just to make ends meet. Things have been a struggle for them. The financial hardship means they're unable to visit their children and grandchildren.

At an age when many Americans are planning their retirements and their financial futures, Mike and Teese are stuck.

Mike stepped up and volunteered to serve his country. But now that the shoe is on the other foot, he's waiting for his country to serve him.

Fortunately, we're seeing one sign of progress at the Social Security Administration. It doesn't take as long for people to get a decision on their claim.

At the end of 2008, it took 514 days, almost a year and a half. In 2011, it took 360 days. This is substantial progress, but still too long. Mr. Astrue, you set a goal of 270 days by the end of fiscal year 2013. We need to meet this goal.

And while your agency has seen fifty percent more retirement applications since 2001, there are fewer workers to deal with the increased work load. These challenges have been compounded because the agency's budget remained flat during the last two years.

The Social Security Administration needs an adequate budget to fix the disability backlog and to root out improper payments. For fiscal year 2013, the President has asked for \$11.76 billion. This is \$307 million more than last year, most of which is dedicated to reducing improper payments, thereby improving the long-term outlook of Social Security.

Every dollar spent to root out improper payments saves six to ten dollars in the long-run. Unfortunately, Congress didn't provide full funding for these efforts in fiscal year 2012. Doing so would have saved taxpayers more than \$800 million. We can't afford to repeat this mistake. Failing to fully fund program integrity work is penny wise and pound foolish.

So let us invest Social Security dollars wisely. Let us reduce the disability backlog. Let us ensure that Americans like Michael Clouse aren't stuck waiting for benefits they've earned. And let us ensure the Social Security program is making our country stronger by improving Americans' well-being.

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