

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 25, 2022

Dr. Kilolo Kijakazi
Acting Commissioner
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21235

Dear Acting Commissioner Kijakazi:

We write to request an update on the Social Security Administration's (SSA) efforts to improve service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic, and efforts to modernize its business processes going forward.

In March 2020, SSA took the unprecedented—and necessary—step to close its 1,230 field offices and shift the agency's operations to a nearly 100 percent remote environment. We appreciate the efforts of your employees to adapt to the new environment and serve the public.

With COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations soaring to their highest recorded levels due to the Omicron variant, we support the agency's efforts to prioritize the safety and well-being of the public and the Agency's staff, especially those who are immunocompromised, as it finalizes the phased reentry plan. That said, SSA has a responsibility and a duty to provide timely and quality service to the public, whether it is provided online, via telephone, or in-person.

As you know, nearly 70 million people rely on Social Security and Supplemental Security Income benefits to pay for rent, groceries, medical bills, and other essential expenses. Additionally, over 45 million people visit SSA's 1,230 field offices every year to file for benefits, make changes to their earnings record, and get guidance from SSA's experienced staff. An incorrect denial of benefits or inaccurate payment can be the difference between a beneficiary having a home or being evicted, or whether or not they can afford their prescription drugs. A recent Washington Post [article](#) illuminated the devastating impacts that poor service delivery can have on vulnerable populations. Further, a November 2021 SSA Inspector General [report](#) found that nearly half of the 151 million callers to field offices and the national 800-number went unanswered, including 16.4 million callers who gave up while waiting in the queue. Many of these service issues have persisted long before the pandemic, but COVID-19 has amplified and exacerbated these gaps in service for all, particularly for those whose sole source of income is Social Security, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), or both.

When you started the job as Acting Commissioner six months ago, your goals were ensuring everyone who is eligible for benefits should receive them and that SSA must treat employees fairly and equitably. Both the Finance Committee and Special Committee on Aging have been concerned about access to Agency services and want to support responsive, effective and

accurate information about Agency programs. The April 2021 Finance Committee [hearing](#) highlighted many of the challenges our constituents encounter when interacting with Social Security, and discussed possibilities to rethink SSA's application process and other services. As Chairman Wyden noted at the outset of the hearing, "making smart improvements to Social Security based on the experience of COVID-19 can pay off big in the future."

With that in mind, we request a response to the following questions about SSA's efforts to improve service delivery, no later than February 17, 2022:

Field Office Service Delivery

1. How will you ensure people who need in-person assistance receive service? Is SSA tracking the number of requests for in-person appointments and what percentage of those requests have been granted; if so, what are the results and how do they vary across regions and field offices? What challenges does SSA face in providing face-to-face services and how will you overcome those challenges?
2. As noted in SSA's COVID-19 [Workplace Safety Plan](#), field office access is restricted to the public by appointment only "for critical services that [SSA] cannot handle remotely." However, SSA's procedures for an individual to secure an in-person appointment appears to favor those who have reliable telephone or Internet access, leaving out at-risk groups. What is SSA doing to ensuring equitable access to in-person appointments?
3. The recent Washington Post article reported that one field office limited drop box hours to just one hour per day. Are such limited hours for drop boxes a common practice at field offices and, if so, what steps are being taken to increase available hours in those field offices? Further, individuals who need to drop off original documents at SSA have to call the field office to find out the office's drop box hours. Are there plans to publish field offices' drop box hours online or on its automated messaging system so individuals do not have to wait on hold to find out a relatively simple request, and SSA does not have to divert resources to respond to each call?
4. How is SSA reducing the need for hands-on review of documents (e.g., driver's licenses, immigration documents, birth certificates, and passports), such as adding features to *my Social Security* and data sharing with other state and federal agencies?

SSDI and SSI Benefits

5. SSDI and SSI benefit applications dipped substantially during the pandemic. State Disability Determination Services received nearly [16 percent](#) fewer SSDI and SSI initial claims during the COVID-19 pandemic than the prior year. What new efforts are SSA using to increase outreach to eligible groups, including homeless individuals, seniors, children with disabilities, and adults with disabilities?
6. At the Finance Committee hearing, Members and witnesses noted the length and the complexity of the SSI application, stretching over 30 pages. At the request of Chairman Wyden, SSA submitted a plan to simplify the SSI application process and make it more

accessible. Please provide an update on SSA's progress on simplifying the application and creating an online version of it (or an online option to express intent to file and protect the filing date).

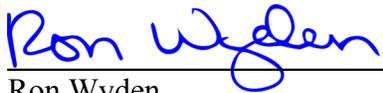
7. We are deeply concerned about the large and growing backlog of cases at the initial and reconsideration levels pending at state agencies, and increased delays in applications and appeals being sent from field offices and Workload Support Units to state agencies. What are SSA's plans to ensure timely and accurate decisions are provided to disability claimants?
8. Is SSA tracking the time to effectuate disability decisions (from favorable decision until retroactive and continuing benefits are provided to claimants)? If so, what trends have you witnessed in recent years, what types of cases are the most challenging to effectuate, and what goals do you have for improving the effectuation process? If not, why, and does SSA have any plans to study this metric?

Improving Service Delivery Going Forward

9. Advocacy groups, non-profit organizations, and claimant representatives are a valuable resource to communicate policy and process changes, as well as provide a "front line" perspective to help develop strategies to improve customer service. What is SSA doing to keep them apprised of policy or process changes? How is SSA leveraging their knowledge and expertise to improve service?
10. Under the previous Administration, SSA implemented Executive Orders to reduce the influence of employee unions and labor-management relations suffered. What steps have you taken to restore the relationship between the agency and the unions? What efforts have you made to work with the unions to return employees to the office?

We look forward to working with you to meet the needs of Social Security beneficiaries, SSI recipients, and all those who use SSA's services.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
Chairman, Committee on
Finance



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
Chairman, Special Committee
on Aging



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator



Thomas R. Carper
United States Senator



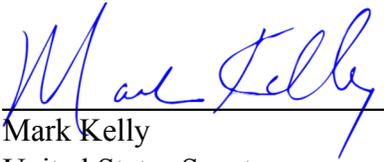
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United States Senator



Kirsten Gillibrand
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Margaret Wood Hassan
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Mark Kelly
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Jacky Rosen
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