



For Immediate Release
May 8, 2008

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**Hearing Statement of Senator Max Baucus (D-Mont.)
Regarding Service to the Public at Social Security Field Offices**

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespeare has Petruchio complain to Katherine: “The poorest service is repaid with thanks.”

Today we will hear that, too often, the service delivered by Social Security field offices is exactly that: “the poorest service.”

Last year, Senator Grassley and I asked the Government Accountability Office to look into service at Social Security’s field offices. Today, GAO releases its report.

GAO found that a significant number of services that Social Security provided to the public were inadequate. And if not for the hard work of staff and managers in the field offices, these service levels would have been even more unsatisfactory.

Clearly, Social Security needs to improve significantly. Social Security staff need to improve productivity even more. And the agency needs more resources. I hope that this hearing can help lead to those changes.

Social Security has about 1,300 field offices. These offices do important jobs. Field offices handle initial claims for benefits, obtaining or replacing a Social Security card, and getting earnings records corrected.

In recent years, Social Security’s field offices have faced three obstacles. Their traditional workloads have grown. They have been given new jobs. And budget cuts have reduced their staffing levels.

As a result, the levels of many services in the field offices have sunk. And that’s in spite of substantial increases in the productivity of its workers.

Probably the worst case is telephone service. GAO found inadequate telephone service in 13 of the 21 field offices that it examined. In two of the offices, they did not answer the phones at all.

My staff found that many Montanans who tried to phone the field offices got busy signals for weeks. In desperation, these Montanans gave up trying to telephone the local field offices. They drove hundreds of miles to the offices and back. This is not acceptable.

In 2006, Social Security surveyed people who reached the field offices by telephone. They found that most callers — 51 percent — had encountered busy signals earlier that day.

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And the 51 percent figure is only the tip of the iceberg. Social Security could survey only the people who actually got through to the field offices' automated answering services or to an employee. If you got a busy signal for weeks on end, and never got through, you were not even part of the survey sample.

What about people who visit the field offices? Unfortunately, people often have to wait a long time before staff serve them. GAO found that across the country last year, more than two and a half million people had to wait between one and two hours before they were served. More than 400,000 people had to wait more than two hours.

And the national association of field office managers reports that "in many of SSA's largest field offices in urban areas, it is not uncommon for the public to wait in excess of 2-4 hours to be served."

Many beneficiaries are elderly or disabled. These waiting times are unacceptable.

And the problem is getting worse. In the first 16 weeks of this year, the number of visitors to field offices has increased by a million.

Another result of the staff shortage is that the field offices are simply deferring some important work. This causes further delays in services.

For example, the agency has cut back on the number of medical continuing disability reviews of beneficiaries receiving disability benefits. These reviews determine whether beneficiaries are still disabled. These reviews save the Federal Government \$10 for every dollar spent.

Earlier in the decade, Social Security performed 800,000 of these reviews every year. This year, Social Security will perform fewer than 240,000 of these reviews. And the President's budget for 2009 provides for fewer than 330,000 of them.

There has also been a serious reduction in the number of SSI redeterminations done annually. These reviews save \$7 for every dollar spent.

And Social Security is also putting off many other important jobs. For example, Social Security disability beneficiaries are supposed to report any earnings promptly so that their benefits can be reduced accordingly. But these earnings are not being recorded in a timely fashion.

By the end of last year, Social Security indicated that there was already a backlog of 1,000 work-years for the workloads that are being deferred. That's not even including the deferred medical continuing disability reviews and SSI redeterminations. By the end of next year, that backlog is expected to grow to 8,100 work-years. The deferral of these jobs means that important services are not being provided when they need to be.

Social Security must improve its service. Social Security needs to make some processes more efficient. It needs to try to get more done over the Internet. And Social Security needs more staff. And that requires Congress to appropriate more money.

From 2000 to 2007, Congress cut appropriations by a total of a billion dollars below the amounts requested by the President. And for 2008 and 2009, the President's requests were themselves inadequate.

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With the efforts of many of my Colleagues and many concerned people, we were able to increase the funding for 2008 by \$150 million. This allowed for a modest increase in staff. But the staff shortage is still severe.

I believe that an increase of at least \$240 million over the President's request is needed for the upcoming year. And sufficient resources must continue to be provided in future years. I hope that my Colleagues will join me in seeking to achieve these objectives.

So let us demand that Social Security further improve the productivity of its staff. Let us give Social Security the tools and resources that it needs to get the job done. And let us work together to ensure that, for the benefit of its beneficiaries, Social Security provides something better than the poorest service.

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