

American Federation of Government Employees

AFFILIATED WITH THE AFL-CIO

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Chairman Larson and Members of the Social Security Subcommittee:

Thank you for hosting this important hearing to look at improving SSA's customer service. SSA has suffered from over a decade of underfunding and was ranked one of the worst agencies in the federal government to work for according to last year's viewpoint survey. It is not surprising that morale is so low at SSA. Many SSA workers on the front line of serving the public are paid at a level that leaves them near poverty. For excellent service to the public, it is imperative that the workforce providing that service feels valued. If we want to improve SSA's customer service, it's vital that Congress fund SSA to improve wages and allow it to attract and retain energized and highly motivated public servants.

My name is Elizabeth LaBelle, and I am the President of the American Federation of Government Employees Local 4012 representing the Social Security Administration's Field Operations, Office of Hearings Operations, and Office of Quality Review employees in the seven states that make up the Denver Region. I am also a Claims Specialist in the Denver Workload Support Unit.

Working for Social Security, I get to help people every day. It was only a few weeks ago that I had a claimant burst into tears on the phone because his retroactive pay was more than enough to stop him from losing his home. I have many stories of claimants I have been able to help and lives touched from benefits paid by SSA. As the head of the local union that represents SSA employees in the Denver region, I am deeply concerned that access to these life-changing benefits will be significantly hampered if something is not done immediately to address pay concerns and understaffing.

Most of my employees who are still working in the region are doing so because, like me, they believe strongly in the Agency's mission and want to help the public we serve. Many of these same employees have been forced to rely on food banks and emergency pantries in recent years because of the consistent pay cuts federal workers have been receiving. The 4% pay cut this year, as our raise was not in line with the rate of inflation, has compounded problems for my bargaining unit and I am regularly on the phone with employees struggling from serious mental health issues exacerbated by their inability to provide for themselves and their families. Many of my employees in the Denver metro area and Colorado Springs are losing more than 50% of their take-home pay to housing costs. That makes it impossible to save and leaves workers vulnerable

to emergencies, such as serious illness or job loss. The fact that there is even one employee anywhere in the federal government that needs to rely on welfare assistance to supplement their income should be troubling to Congress, but at my agency alone I know of 15 federal families in the Denver metro area and 7 federal families in Colorado Springs who *regularly utilize* food banks to feed their children. There are an additional 20 federal families that we know of that sporadically rely on these same services. There are about 258 employees in my bargaining unit in both cities combined.

I find it deeply troubling that this problem is allowed to continue unfettered. Not surprisingly, given the inadequate compensation for extremely hard and important work, almost all of the offices in the Denver metro and Colorado Springs area are significantly understaffed. Turnover is at an all-time high, with the aggravating factor in leaving always pay and poor management. SSA is having difficulty hiring and training employees fast enough to replace the employees leaving. Given these staffing issues, AFGE Local 4012 has been conducting exit interviews to find out why employees are leaving. I would like to outline a little of what we learned.

Customer Service Representatives (CSRs) in field offices do the bulk of what we call Title II post-entitlement actions – working directly with the public on things like getting a replacement Social Security card, executing name or citizen status changes, fixing wages, work reports, updating addresses, addressing payment issues and overpayments. Most CSRs also handle phone calls from the public.

This work is essential. As members of this Subcommittee know, if the field offices are understaffed and there is a backlog, your offices get called. We work as hard as we can, because we know how important this work is. But with a growing and aging population and a shrinking workforce, even treading water is close to impossible.

The CSR position caps out at a GS-08, which is currently \$54,000 in the Denver metro and \$50,400 in Colorado Springs. It is difficult to live on even a GS-08 salary in Denver and Colorado Springs – especially if you are a single parent.

Like CSRs, Claims Specialists (CSs) also play a crucial role in serving the public. CSs conduct claim filing interviews and gather evidence to appropriately adjudicate claims decisions. The low pay has made it difficult for the agency to retain CSRs, and as a result CSs have had to start taking on the CSR workload and seen their workload balloon out of control. This increased workload, combined with low wages, has driven CSs to leave SSA for other agencies or private sector positions.

Low staffing has led to increased nasty calls from the public, undue pressure to process claims and significant mental health issues in my bargaining unit. Unfortunately, I have been on the receiving end of many calls from employees expressing suicidal ideations due to financial and workplace stress to the point that I keep information on inpatient treatment programs, workers' compensation and DOL's FMLA forms handy.

In addition to the low pay, stress, burn out, lack of a living wage, and a hostile working environment have been rapidly driving turnover in my region. That is understandable when there is increased pressure to meet unrealistic processing times with limited staff.

Chairman Larson, this has to change. The federal government should serve as an example to the private sector, not an excuse to point at for low wages and negative working environments. My employees had many needed benefits cut under the previous commissioner, and agency management has so far flat out refused to reinstate these benefits or renegotiate our contract as ordered by the Biden Administration. Without this necessary bargaining, the Union is unable to advocate for more workplace benefits – like our vision program, child care assistance, and other work/life balance programs - to compete with other federal agencies. It takes approximately two years to train a Claims Specialist. It will take years to dig out of the staffing crisis facing the agency, the employees I represent need help to strengthen the agency's ability to serve the public.

Federal employees, *all federal employees*, need at least a 15% pay raise across the board to have the same quality of life as they did in 2005. Pay freezes, fluctuating inflation rates, dramatic changes to our pension program, and the soaring costs of property have contributed to this need. Agencies like SSA cannot attract and retain top talent without paying reasonably competitive wages. The Denver region and the Denver metro and Colorado Springs locality areas need a significant adjustment to match the current cost of living, and *this adjustment cannot wait*. With housing costs in Colorado exploding, more and more federal employees will descend into poverty as a journeymen CS's average take home per paycheck is only \$1850 biweekly – which is \$40 less than the average monthly rent in Denver and we do not have many journeymen working in our offices at this point because of our turnover issues.

Thank you for accepting this submitted testimony, it is my hope that Congress can work to better fund SSA, increase federal wages, oversee the bargaining of a new contract and ensure the restoration of benefits to the front-line public servants helping Americans access their earned benefits.

Sincerely,

/s/ Elizabeth LaBelle

Elizabeth LaBelle

President, AFGE Local 4012