March 27, 2020

The Honorable David Black
Deputy Commissioner
Office of the Commissioner
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, Maryland 21235

Dear Deputy Commissioner Black:

On behalf of our 38 million members and all older Americans nationwide, AARP would like to thank the Social Security Administration (SSA) for your efforts to prioritize the health and well-being of your customers, especially those who are most vulnerable to the coronavirus. Your recent decision to suspend face-to-face services at SSA field offices will help encourage social distancing and prevent the spread of COVID-19. As you know, we have shared your decision with our members and other older Americans, and we are committed to communicating with them about the best ways to access SSA services during this time. To be able to give them the information they need, we have a number of questions about how services are being impacted and what contingency measures are being planned. Your answers will significantly advance our understanding and that of our members about the resources you can offer individuals now and the services you intend to prioritize.

1. AARP notes that SSA is primarily leveraging its online services to make up for the necessary closure of SSA field offices, while SSA phone service is prioritizing specific critical services for people in dire need. What is SSA’s plan for individuals who are not able to access SSA’s online services, yet do not meet the critical or dire need definitions to be prioritized for receiving phone line service?

2. AARP is especially concerned about vulnerable individuals who may typically require face-to-face interaction with SSA to receive critical services.
   a. What services, if any, does SSA provide that cannot be performed either online or over the phone?
   b. What are SSA’s plans to provide services to vulnerable individuals who may require these services or are typically best served by face-to-face interactions?
c. Does SSA have any plans to expedite processing of applications for representative payees or otherwise modify procedures for those who may be unable to make financial decisions due to the coronavirus?

3. Establishing a My Social Security account can be challenging for many individuals. Is SSA planning to modify any of its identity verification procedures that require a visit or call to a local office so that online users can overcome any obstacles establishing an account? What are the SSA’s estimates of customers who will be unable to establish an account during this period of time?

4. SSA already has a significant volume of calls. What are SSA’s plans to manage the additional volume that will result from the closure of SSA field offices? Has SSA considered hiring temporary staff to handle surges in calls?

5. What are the current wait times and busy signal rates for SSA’s national 800 number and field office phone lines?

6. In addition to social media and the SSA.gov website, how is SSA notifying the public about field office closures and current service delivery options? For example, what messaging will be available on the national 800 number and local field office numbers when callers are on hold? Has SSA conducted any outreach to television networks, radio, and/or newspapers across the country?

7. What workloads are SSA currently prioritizing in response to the coronavirus changes? What workloads will SSA not be prioritizing, if any?

8. In addition to utilizing SSA’s online services, will individual retirement and disability (DI and SSI) claims be taken via the national 800 number or field office phone lines? If an individual is not able to claim retirement or disability benefits online, will they be required to wait until field offices reopen?

9. What has the impact of the coronavirus been on SSA workloads in the past two weeks? Have they declined, increased, or stayed the same? Will SSA make data available on workloads each week, available staff to serve, impact on wait times/busy signals, for the nation as a whole and for states, regions and/or geographic areas?

10. Will SSA provide extensions or grace periods to individuals who face filing, appeals, evidence and/or other deadlines?

11. What areas of the country cannot request a Social Security replacement card online?

12. What data is SSA tracking to measure the impact of the decision to close field offices on the number of customers successfully served? Is SSA considering any additional data sets or measures to track the impact of field office closures on service delivery?

13. What impact has the coronavirus had on SSA staffing levels?

14. Given the closure of SSA field offices, does SSA have plans to redeploy any current employees to mission critical tasks, including handling any surge in calls to SSA’s national 800 number or field offices?
15. Are there any SSA field offices where no employees are physically working onsite or at lower-than-needed levels to handle critical issues? How will critical and any other dire need cases be handled in that event? Has SSA begun to develop plans for any surge in face-to-face service needs when SSA field offices are reopened?

16. In regard to SSA’s Disability Determination Services (DDS), as state agencies, state rules may vary regarding the status of their operations. Are there any DDSs that are currently closed? If so, what is happening to their work? In the event of closures, would disability cases not be processed? For those who remain open, are consultative examinations still being ordered?

17. In regard to SSA’s Office of Hearing Operations, what has the impact of the coronavirus been on staffing levels and availability? AARP understands that hearings are being offered via teleconference for those currently scheduled and that hearings will be rescheduled if the teleconference is declined. What service delivery impacts are anticipated in the Office of Hearing Operations? Do you anticipate a growth in backlogs? If so, which specific backlogs, if any?

18. In regard to SSA Payment Centers, anecdotal information suggests that many beneficiaries already wait nearly six months for benefits approved by hearings or appeals. What are the anticipated impacts of the coronavirus on SSA payment center operations and/or the payments they provide to individuals?

19. In regard to E-Verify, will SSA continue to verify Social Security numbers for wage reporting purposes via the Verification Service and the Consent Based Verification Service? If so, where does this work fit into SSA’s priorities in response to the coronavirus and how will it impact other SSA workloads?

We would like to thank you in advance for your attention in responding to these inquiries. As SSA continues to provide much-needed benefits and services to millions of Americans, AARP will continue to communicate with our members and other older Americans about the best ways to engage with you during this difficult time. Our commitment to communicate important information about Social Security and SSA’s services with our members has never been stronger than it is today. If you have any questions for us, please feel free to contact Cristina Martin Firvida at cmfirvida@aarp.org or 202-434-6194 or Tom Nicholls at tnicholls@aarp.org or 202-434-3765.

Sincerely,

Nancy A. LeaMond
Executive Vice President and
Chief Advocacy and Engagement Officer