



601 E Street, NW | Washington, DC 20049  
202-434-2277 | 1-888-OUR-AARP | 1-888-687-2277 | TTY: 1-877-434-7598  
aarp.org | twitter: @aarp | facebook.com/aarp | youtube.com/aarp

May 18, 2022

The Honorable John Larson  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Social Security  
Ways & Means Committee  
1102 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin Hern  
Acting Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Social Security  
Ways & Means Committee  
1139 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Larson and Acting Ranking Member Hern:

On behalf of our 38 million members and all older Americans nationwide, AARP would like to thank you and the members of the Social Security Subcommittee for holding an important hearing on “Strengthening Social Security’s Customer Service.” AARP believes that all Americans deserve to receive timely and accurate services from the Social Security Administration (SSA). Unfortunately, people have experienced declining customer service at SSA for many years, largely as the result of chronic underfunding. AARP is therefore calling on Congress and the President to provide no less than the full \$15.156 billion appropriations amount requested by Acting Commissioner Kijakazi for FY 2023, in order to make necessary service improvements at the agency.

SSA does not have the resources it requires to provide all services promptly and properly to its customers, and the agency’s funding challenges have very real consequences for older Americans and people with disabilities. More than 10,000 people die every year while waiting for a final decision on their disability claims. SSA recently reported its average disability claim processing time in April 2022 grew to an all-time high of 187 days. Ten years ago, the yearly average processing time was only 70 days. Individuals who appeal a negative determination wait two years on average for a final hearing decision while their health worsens. Even routine questions take longer to get answered, with callers to the agency waiting an average of 27 minutes, nearly ten times longer than about ten years ago.

While several factors may have led to these issues, SSA’s inability to remedy its customer service problems has been directly affected by a decade’s worth of underfunding from Congress. Between 2010 and 2021, SSA’s operating budget shrank by 13 percent even as the number of beneficiaries grew by 22 percent to more than 70 million Americans. It is not realistic to expect SSA to provide the necessary level of services to a growing customer base with a shrinking budget.



Additional resources from Congress would permit SSA to improve all services, and especially to reduce the unacceptably long wait times within the disability system. Disability benefits are a lifeline to workers with serious health issues, including those who are older, and adequate funding is needed to ensure that the disability determination process is accurate, timely, and efficient. At the same time, SSA should collect and report sufficient data to ensure program integrity. This should also allow for research about the impact of the program as well as monitoring the experience of applicants and beneficiaries. Finally, SSA should work to address any fraud in the system by continuing and enhancing existing efforts to detect fraud and by increasing penalties for those found guilty.

The last two years have illustrated how important SSA's online and phone services are. For many of our members, getting answers over the phone is either sufficient or preferential to getting them in person. We are hopeful that the agency has learned practical lessons over the past two years to create a more efficient process for seeking help over the phone. Additional resources would help SSA to continue improvements to its phone services, both at local offices and the national 800 number.

AARP appreciates the steps the agency has taken to reach vulnerable populations who may be eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and/or disability benefits and believe SSA should continue to place particular emphasis on this work. With additional funding, SSA should consider expanding its outreach efforts to raise awareness of SSI and disability programs. SSA should also continue its work to streamline SSI and other application processes and make them more user-friendly.

AARP recognizes the enormous demands placed on SSA management and staff across the country to both administer benefits and provide much-needed services. We also appreciate the hard work and dedication of SSA employees who continue to do their work with reduced staff and limited resources. We applaud SSA for reopening its field offices nationwide and we ask that the Committee continue to evaluate the ability of individuals to access in person services, and the extent to which SSA field offices are ensuring customer health and safety.

Social Security is a lifeline for millions of Americans who count on the agency to be there for them when they need it most. Approximately 175 million Americans are currently paying into Social Security and over 65 million Americans are receiving benefits. This includes over 50 million retirees, 5.8 million survivors, and over 9 million individuals with disabilities, and their respective families. SSA also administers SSI, which provides monthly cash benefits to about 7.6 million older adults who have very low incomes and resources. Providing SSA with no less than the full \$15.156 billion appropriations amount requested by the Acting Commissioner for FY 2023 would be a positive first step in helping to ensure the agency has the resources it needs to fulfill its mission and deliver benefits and services properly and promptly to its growing number of customers.

AARP would like to thank you again for holding this important hearing. We appreciate your efforts to shed light on the varied and ongoing challenges customers can face when interacting with the SSA. We look forward to working with you, the members of the Committee and Congressional appropriators to ensure Americans can continue to rely not only on their earned

Social Security benefits, but on the vital services they and their families need. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me or have your staff contact Tom Nicholls on our Government Affairs staff at [tnicholls@aarp.org](mailto:tnicholls@aarp.org) or at 202-434-3765.

Sincerely,



Bill Sweeney  
Senior Vice President  
Government Affairs