

# Budget and staff cuts – The real Social Security crisis

By STEVE KOFAHL

The first members of the huge Baby Boom generation are beginning to file applications for Social Security retirement benefits. Those not old enough to apply for retirement are in their disability-prone years, and record numbers of them are seeking disability benefits. Unfortunately, impacted by these growing workloads, the Social Security Administration (SSA) is being starved of funding and, thereby, denied the front-line employees needed to provide the quality service that American workers have paid for and deserve. Applicants and taxpayers — present and future — are being seriously harmed as payments are delayed.

SSA employees who retire are not being replaced, and the agency is on track to lose 6,000 positions in just the past two years.

Staffing will soon drop to its lowest level since 1972, in the face of rapidly-expanding workloads. More field offices are being closed and hours of operation are being reduced in others. Field representatives responsible for community outreach have all but disappeared, and the agency is steering benefit applicants toward Internet self-service. Many older and disabled individuals who attempt to file for benefits online are disadvantaged, and even lose benefits they are due because they do not understand complex SSA rules.

More agency functions are being outsourced to entities that are not held accountable.

The greatest hardships are suffered by applicants for disability benefits. Almost two-thirds of initial claims are denied, but almost two-thirds of those who request a hearing before an administrative law judge are ultimately approved.

Nationally, there are about 577,000 initial claims pending, plus 746,000 hearing requests. About 84,000 of the hearing requests have been filed by veterans. Hearing request backlogs have more than doubled in the last seven years. An applicant approved for benefits after a hearing will have waited about two years on average from the date of filing a claim before finally receiving benefits, with 496 of these days spent waiting for a hearing. This clearly is unacceptable. Too many applicants lose their life savings, their homes, and their families while they wait. Some die before their claims are finally approved.

Service deterioration is not limited to the disabili-

ty programs run by SSA. It is getting much more difficult to get through on the agency's toll-free number, and more than half of the callers to SSA field offices get a busy signal.

Continuing disability reviews that save taxpayers over \$10 for every \$1 invested have been cut back severely, as have Supplemental Security Income eligibility reviews, which save \$7 for every \$1 spent to do them. This is penny-wise and pound foolish, and harms taxpayers of all ages.

Social Security will collect \$189 billion more than it will pay out in benefits this year, and some of the money collected will be used to fund program administration, so why isn't there enough money available to properly run the programs? The reason is that the agency's annual administrative budget must be authorized as part of the Labor-HHS-Education-Independent Agencies spending bill.

SSA has been struggling to function under a Continuing Resolution, which limits spending to the levels that have been in place for each of the last two fiscal years.

In late 2006, SSA Commissioner JoAnne Barnhart requested \$10.44 billion from President Bush for the fiscal year that began Oct. 1, 2007, and asked to serve another 6-year term. In January 2007, Bush proposed to spend \$9.597 billion for SSA in his budget proposal, knowing that limiting spending to that level would greatly accelerate service deterioration. And he nominated Michael Astrue as commissioner to replace Barnhart. House and Senate budget committees raised the amount for SSA to about \$10.1 billion last spring. The House Appropriations Committee slashed the amount to \$9.697 billion, and Senate Appropriations to \$9.872 billion, in late summer. Before sending the Labor-HHS authorization bill to the president, the Senate raised it to \$9.918 billion, and the bill passed the Senate easily. The 435-member House passed it as well, and was within two votes of the two-thirds majority needed to override a veto. The president vetoed the bill, trying to present himself as a born-again fiscal conservative (domestic programs only), and he threatened to veto all of the other domestic spending bills.

Congress largely acceded to his demands, cut spending levels, added war funding with no strings attached, and placed all 11 bills in an omnibus package. SSA was left with \$ 9.747 billion, which is \$693 million less than what Barnhart said she

needed, and just \$150 million more than what the president proposed.

Though it is an improvement over the Continuing Resolution, and the first year that Congress exceeded Bush's budget request, it is woefully inadequate, and service will continue to decline. The president is expected to sign the bill.

The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) and other organizations that care about SSA are already lobbying for an adequate SSA budget for next year. We have not yet heard what Commissioner Astrue has requested, or what Bush will propose in 2008, but we are not waiting. Several senators from both political parties have already asked the White House Office of Management and Budget to support \$11 billion.

The American Customer Satisfaction Index released Dec. 17, 2007, reveals that SSA's score has fallen from 84 percent to 72 percent since 2000. The man selected president that year has so far failed to privatize Social Security, but he and the Congresses since then have managed to cripple, dismantle, and discredit the agency and its workforce.

Seniors, the disabled, survivors and dependents of workers, taxpayers, and their children and children deserve better. They should demand change now, and in November.

*(Editor's Note: Steve Kofahl is president of the American Federation of Government Employees Local 3937. An affiliate of the AFL-CIO, the union represents Social Security Administration employees in Oregon, Washington, Alaska and Idaho.)*

## Thanks to unions, 'Presents from Partners' best ever

To the Editor:

This letter comes with deepest thanks for labor's compassionate support of the 2007 "Presents from Partners" toy drive.

You joined hands with 30 other organizations in an unprecedented outpouring of kindness and generosity on behalf of kids in need. As a result, nearly 1,700 toys were distributed to 574 underprivileged children this past December. Those numbers exceed last year's record highs by nearly 40 percent!

In partnership with the Northwest Oregon Labor Council and Saturn of Beaverton, we held our 11th annual holiday toy distribution party at the Genesis Community Fellowship in Northeast Portland on Dec. 20. Each of the 354 children in attendance received three new toys, a picture with Santa, along with the gift of recognition, delight and a positive memory to last a lifetime — all because you cared.

Your generosity also helped distribute gifts to an additional 220 children who are homeless or whose families are among the working poor.

Children First for Oregon reports that 16.8 percent of Oregon's children lived in poverty in 2007. That number is up 15 percent from 2006. While this obviously growing need is discouraging, it is uplifting to see such an abundant, genuine display of care and concern for those less fortunate. Your generosity helped us provide more outreach than ever before.

On behalf of all the children and their families, my heartfelt thanks and gratitude for making the 2007 "Presents from Partners" toy drive and distribution an unparalleled success.

Glenn Shuck  
Executive Director  
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