



April 21, 2022

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives

Dear Leaders Schumer and McConnell, Speaker Pelosi, and Leader McCarthy:

The undersigned organizations of the Consortium of Constituents with Disabilities' (CCD) Social Security Task Force urge you to take immediate action to assure that the Social Security Administration has the resources it needs to respond to the increased demand associated with reopening Field Offices to the public after two years without any in-person services. Just as urgent is the need to address SSA's outdated phone systems that generate busy signals much of the time; keep people on hold for hours when they do manage to get through; and regularly drop calls mid-conversation when they finally are able to speak to an SSA representatives. SSA urgently needs supplemental funding for its FY 2022 administrative expenses, as well as full funding of the President's budget request for the Agency in FY 2023, in order to meet its mission of providing income security for all Americans.

CCD is the largest coalition of national organizations working together to advocate for Federal public policy that ensures the self-determination, independence, empowerment, integration and inclusion of children and adults with disabilities in all aspects of society free from racism, ableism, sexism, and xenophobia, as well as LGBTQ+ based discrimination and religious intolerance.

CCD Social Security Task Force focuses on disability policy issues in the Title II disability programs and the Title XVI Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program. The SSI and Title II cash benefits, along with the related Medicaid and Medicare benefits, are the means of survival for millions of individuals with disabilities. They rely on SSA to promptly and fairly adjudicate their applications for disability benefits and to handle many other actions critical to their well-being.

When Congress recently passed the Omnibus Appropriations Act, it allocated \$1 billion less than SSA's funding request, to an amount far lower than proposed by both the House and Senate Appropriations committees. This funding amount is insufficient to meet SSA's fixed costs, let alone address the crisis circumstances that the agency is currently facing. From 2010 to 2021, SSA's operating budget declined by 14% after inflation, while the number of beneficiaries rose by 21%, primarily as a result of the growth in new retirement beneficiaries. This has also led to staffing shortages, with the agency losing over 7000 full-time equivalents between 2010 and

2020 and an additional 1,500 since the beginning of the pandemic. Less money and less staff to serve more beneficiaries challenges SSA's ability to provide good customer service at reopened field offices, while continuing to deal with massive phone issues. These are many of the reasons why CCD urged Congress to fully fund the agency's budget request—they are already underfunded, but face particular issues this year that mean that the FY22 funding was crucial.

After two years of field office closure due to the pandemic, the agency is finally reopening offices to the public in April. SSA staff undertook herculean efforts early in the pandemic to shift work online and to the phone lines, including publishing more widely the direct lines to the field offices to address the level of need. We understand that call volume tripled and has continued to grow throughout the pandemic. And there is no question that SSA has been ill-equipped to deal with this new demand: the SSA Office of Inspector General found in FY2020, 4.6% of all calls received a busy signal and only 51% of calls were actually handled. This aligns with the anecdotal reports that our organizations have received since the beginning of the pandemic of waiting for hours on hold. But these reports have grown even more dire since late February. We have been told of beneficiaries and their assistors receiving a busy signal from every field office in a state, and calling repeatedly over the course of a day or a week and being unable to get through. We have reported this issue to SSA and did not receive a clear explanation for why the phone service has gotten particularly worse recently, although we were told that it is unlikely these phone issues will be resolved until the fall given the agency's current resources. The fact that these new and more serious issues are coming just as field offices reopen is extremely concerning to us, and funneling calls away from field offices to the national 800 number is unlikely to result in improved customer service.

We were already particularly concerned that the SSA reopening would result in long lines and delayed access to services. It is not possible to file an SSI application online and those applications have dropped sharply during the pandemic. We expect those individuals to now come to field offices. Similarly, other people will have simply put off their business, like changing their names following a wedding or sorting out a Social Security card for a new baby. Older adults first filing for retirement benefits and people with disabilities filing for SSDI also are likely to visit the offices in droves. SSA serves people at a multitude of different stages of life with a collection of different issues. Many people have put off those issues until the field offices are reopened and we expect a rush of people and SSA to not have the capacity to serve many. Now, the added complication of the worsening phone issues means that more people who might have been able to address their issues online will be forced to join the long lines at the field offices. This is unacceptable.

We urge Congress to act as quickly as possible to fund SSA to the full amount requested in the FY22 budget and FY23 budget. The people with disabilities and older adults who rely on monthly checks deserve quality customer service, as do the millions of others who need some service from SSA. SSA does not have the resources to ensure the level of customer service that the public expects and deserves. Congress needs to take steps now to give them those resources.

Sincerely,

American Association on Health and Disability
Community Legal Services of Philadelphia
Easterseals

Epilepsy Foundation
Family Voices
Lakeshore Foundation
National Alliance on Mental Illness
National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities
National Association of Disability Representatives
National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare
National Disability Institute
National Down Syndrome Congress
National Organization of Social Security Claimants' Representatives (NOSSCR)
The Arc of the United States
United Spinal