

The Real Deal

Newsletter of the SSA General Committee of the
American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO



MAY/JUNE 2010

Here are some important online
tools to keep you updated:

www.mycontract2009.org

www.preserveyoursocialsecurity.org

www.afgec220.org

www.facebook.com – Search for
**The Social Security Administration
Needs New Leadership**

www.afgelocal1923.org

Welcome to the SSA General Committee's newsletter. Here you will find bi-monthly updates on the issues you face as an employee of the Social Security Administration.

As employees of the SSA, we are at a crossroads. We are in the middle of a hard fight with management to win a much deserved, better contract. We are faced with stress and hardships on the job and we are working hard to make the right changes. We are organizing more members into our ranks and we are lobbying Congress on your behalf.

We don't have an easy road before us... There is much that needs to be addressed. But we didn't become members of AFGE because we knew all was well. We have a voice and we

are not afraid to use it. The General Committee is dedicated to you, members of AFGE. We are elected by you and come from the rank and file of the Social Security employees.

Your General Committee,

Witold Skwierczynski, Field Operations – President,
Council 220

Agatha Joseph, PSC – President, Council 109

Jim Marshall, ODAR – President Council 215

Earl Tucker, OQP – President Council 224

Cindy Sipple, Local 2809 – President

Cynthia Ennis, HQ – President LI923



AFGE SSA Council 220 President Witold Skwierczynski testifies before the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Social Security.

The Effects of Understaffing

Staffing losses, increased workloads and wasteful management practices are the greatest factors contributing to processing delays, backlogs, and loss of service at SSA. According to feedback

from our offices, and surveys completed by AFGE and the GAO, the morale of SSA employees is very low. Employees experience great stress in trying to process assigned workloads and meet the public's needs. The GAO's 2009 field office study reported that 65%

of employees surveyed felt great or very great stress on a daily basis and 74% of managers complained of high stress levels. Employees and managers complained about cutbacks in training and mentoring of new staff. In a recent

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I've made statements in the past that I feel less stress while working with the SWAT team – and having weapons pointed at me by perpetrators – than I do going into the Social Security office every day.

– AFGE Local 3984 EVP, SSA Claims Representative and SWAT police officer Daniel Woosley, Louisville, KY

The Effects of Understaffing (cont'd from page 1)

AFGE survey more than 25% of the respondents spoke of being encouraged to do extra uncompensated work during non-duty time, i.e., during lunch or break or before or after hours to complete impossible work demands.

These type of questionable practices in which management engages are not only unfair to the employees, but serve to enhance individual office statistical performance. These practices also include processing claims for individuals who are clearly ineligible for benefits, and padding statistics by taking unnecessary actions such as reissuing Medicare cards to every client in the office whether or not they request such cards. Systems tricks are employed by some managers to reflect inaccurate processing times in order to claim better statistical performance and to paint a rosier picture in the understaffed and overburdened SSA field offices.

The Disability Backlog Continues to Grow

The tremendous disability backlog gets coverage in the media on an almost daily basis. That's why the fact that this problem is persistent, ongoing, and still very real leaves most Americans scratching their heads. Why isn't this being fixed? We are urging Congressional leaders to carefully examine how additional funds for disability case processing are being squandered at the Office of Disability Adjudication and Review.

AFGE is hearing from ODAR employees that layers of management in headquarters and regional offices have increased even though the additional funds allocated were meant to process the work at individual offices. It makes no sense that ODAR headquarters has increased the numbers of GS-13 and GS-14 positions – which are not direct service positions – and have no impact on decreasing the backlog of hearings cases.

The bottom line is that the funds have been provided to address these backlogs have not trickled down to the people who actually do the work and we've been telling Congress about it. SSA workers deserve more help to process these backlogs and a less stressful work environment – and disability claimants deserve timely, consistent initial claims decisions and payments.



The Problem with iClaims

You work with it every day. It was conceived to make the process more streamlined, more user friendly. It was supposed to cut down on waiting times in office lobbies. The system looked great on paper...until the actual claims started coming in.

On the positive side, service over the Internet by a claimant can be initiated, and sometimes delivered, without contacting an SSA employee. The negative effects are not so obvious, and are not acknowledged or made public by the Agency. Unfortunately, little has been done to correct the serious problems.

We assist people who are elderly, disabled, often uneducated, poor and homeless. Many applicants struggle just to complete simple forms. SSA has invested millions of dollars to train its Claims Representatives (CR) to complete and process these applications. However, the Agency now asserts that someone without training or assistance can perform these functions correctly and efficiently. This is simply not the case.

To further disadvantage the public, SSA management issued a new policy, effective September 2008, to accept the applicant's month of entitlement without any discussion with an SSA claims representative. In a survey of SSA claims representatives about iClaims and these very policy changes, an astounding 80% of CRs disagreed with the new MOE policy which essentially boils down to a 'gag order' on CRs. And in fact, 45% of CRs who responded indicated that at least two re-contacts (including follow-ups) with the internet applicant



are necessary to complete a claim due to errors by the claimant. These percentages are too great to ignore and the gag order is too harmful to be allowed as policy.

The General Committee has asked Congress to direct Commissioner Astrue to do the following to alleviate the crisis in iClaims:

- Cease implementation of any and all systems and/or policy changes that will result in, cause or allow incorrect entitlement decisions and benefit payments.
- Cease and desist in outsourcing Social Security Retirement and Disability claim functions.
- Institute policies that require SSA employees to contact all claimants filing their Retirement or Disability claims over the Internet, so that rights and responsibilities are explained.
- Review all previously processed Internet claims to ensure that those persons were entitled to the right benefits, and at the right amount.
- Perform audits on a statistically valid sample of submitted Internet claims, prior to SSA employee intervention, and report back to Congress by the end of FY 2010. The audits should capture the accuracy of the

iClaims Problems:

- **Programming flaws and policies that fail to correctly identify "protective filing dates"**
- **Identity and privacy concerns**
- **Incorrect payments**
- **High volume of errors, resulting in re-contacts**
- **Creation of a new backlog at Social Security**
- **Failure to authenticate the identities of applicants**
- **Reduction of advice and assistance to claimants regarding key benefit decisions**
- **Failure to explain applicant rights and responsibilities**

claim, any payment errors found, and the need to hand off to an SSA employee before a final decision.

- Provide Congress with the SSA General Counsel's guidance/rationale for concluding that the initiation of an Internet claim does not constitute a protective filing by law.
- Eliminate the 'gag order' regarding explaining month of election choices to filers for benefits.



To become a member of AFGE and to learn more about the SSA contract negotiations, go to: www.mycontract2009.org/How_you_can_help.php

10 Great Reasons to Join AFGE

- 1** AFGE is dedicated to you—the hard working employees of SSA.
- 2** With AFGE, SSA employees stand united.
- 3** AFGE fights for your rights in the workplace.
- 4** AFGE stands up to abusive supervisors.
- 5** AFGE coordinates full-scale legislative and political action programs for SSA employees.
- 6** AFGE blows the whistle on management misconduct.
- 7** AFGE works with Congress on your issues.
- 8** AFGE represents you—and we have a long, successful record of winning grievances.
- 9** When you join AFGE, you become part of a family that has more than 80 years of experience working for you.
- 10** AFGE is a union of employees, by employees and for employees.



Office of Quality Performance Federalize the DDS's

disability claims at a much lower rate than higher income states. And while OQP is tasked with enforcing national disability claims standards, there seems to be a complete lack of

It would make sense that if the problems with inconsistent decisions at the initial claims level are addressed, appeals will diminish. It's time to modernize and create a unified, comprehensive federal disability system – the bifurcation between the state and federal workers has gone on far too long.

Tasked with keeping track of nationwide consistency of disability claims, OQP has found that SSA's approach to disability fails to address the problems and inadequacies of processing claims via the states' DDS, where there is ample evidence of regional differences in claims processing. Studies have shown that low income states approve initial

standards nationally. The chances for a claimant to be approved at the initial level have everything to do with where he or she lives, and little to do with his or her actual disability. Not only that, but the state DDS system also is fully subsidized by SSA, however, state budgetary problems have caused multiple states to furlough workers assigned to do SSA work, exacerbating the backlog even further.

AFGE made the recommendation to Congress to federalize the state Disability Determination Services, keeping the jobs in state but with federal staffing. Consistent oversight and training is needed and will bring timely, consistent nationwide decisions for the vulnerable disabled claimants that we are supposed to serve equally and without bias.