

HOOSIER HAPPENINGS

AFGE Local 3571

February 2015

World Class Customer Service

By Edith Garza and Daniel Summer

In an inauguration of the Social Security data center on September 29, 2014 Carolyn W. Colvin, acting commissioner of Social Security stated "Social Security has always been known as a 'can-do' agency with world-class customer service; this new facility allows us to meet the growing demands of the millions of individuals who count on us each and every day." /www.ssa.gov/news/#!/post/9-2014-7)

Let's examine the words of the acting commissioner in context. When the commissioner touts Social Security's famous "world-class customer service", it seems that she would seek to preserve the high level of competency and efficiency that has defined our agency for decades. However, it appears that the effects of recent policies, administrative actions of the agency over the past several years and the looming repercussions of the proposed Vision 2025 threaten to destroy all semblance of the customer service that the Social Security Administration prides itself upon. As they are implemented, the effects of these policies are already being felt. The loss of in-person services and the reduction of office hours have become a serious hardship for the millions of seniors and disabled claimants who depend on Social Security. Many do not own a computer, have no internet access and do not understand technology. Nevertheless, these tax-paying members of our society still have the right to the "world-class customer service" that Social Security Administration has provided for decades.

There is a qualitative difference in the customer service given in the past and what is presently being called customer service. The question confronting those of us who interface with the public is simple: How does the Social Security Administration now define world-class service? Is the new definition of world-class service to

insist that the public be forced to file on the internet? Is it world-class service to give the public the burden of understanding our complex policies with little or no help? Is it world-class service to close field offices earlier each weekday and at noon in the middle of the week because the agency refuses to hire adequate staff? Is it world-class service to insist that the public not receive the yearly regular statements of their benefits that they have grown accustomed to? And is it world-class service for frustrated customers, unable to get anyone on the phones or to come to those offices only to find that no one can see them due to the limited amount of staff?

Surveys by the Associated Press and LifeGoesStrong.com make it clear that the duties of the Social Security Administration are expanding as baby boomers retire. Today, the oldest baby boomers are already in their 60s. By 2030, about one in five Americans will be older than 65, not counting the millions of other beneficiaries receiving disability benefits. These are the facts; the agency has long been aware of them.

In 2010, 54 million Americans received SSA benefits. That number is projected to grow by 16.5 million over the next 10 years. Yet it is clear that the field offices are becoming fewer in number. *Cont. page 2*



Did you know?

Your Union dues are deductible on your federal income taxes? Usually you can deduct on Schedule A (Form 1040) line 21, unreimbursed employee Union dues and expenses. If you use Turbo Tax or another home tax program, the deduction should be under miscellaneous tax deductions. For additional information, please visit www.irs.gov/publications/p17/ch28.html

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Despite the coming of age of entitlement by baby boomers in recent years, the response of the Social Security Administration to this challenge has been not to expand to meet the growing demands of an explosion of claimants but to contract, offering fewer services by fewer workers with fewer offices with fewer office hours.

As a Social Security employee, I am at a distinct advantage regarding the level of information that I have regarding Social Security policies and benefits. But as part of the research for this article, I wanted some insight into the actual experience of the average American may encounter when inquiring about his or her benefits. Therefore, I decided to get a projection of my retirement benefits using the same method by which we ask the public to access our services. After all, it has been repeated that this is "a simple process" part and parcel to our "world class service".

When I tried to create an account this was the result:

We're sorry...

We cannot process your request at this time. Please try again later.

For further assistance, please contact us

This is the future of Social Security's famous world-class service. Maybe it is your future. You may soon be seeing this as part of your experience with the Social Security Administration. In the past, answers to an inquiry or public concern have never been farther than a local Social Security field office, where employees are trained in the complex policies and laws that govern the agencies tasks. For most of its history, the public expected and received prompt, accurate and helpful answers to their questions from a well-schooled Social Security field office staff. "Vision 2025" would virtually eliminate face-to-face service, replacing it with internet services and an 800 phone number. Recent field office closings in Florida, Massachusetts, New York and California illustrate the slippery slope

that will inevitably lead to the death of the public service as we know it at a time when it is most needed by more people than in any time in history.

Senator Bill Nelson, Democrat of Florida, said, "Seniors are not being served when you arbitrarily close offices and reduce access to services." In March 2014, SSA closed a field office in Gadsden County Florida, assuming consumers could use a field office in Tallahassee instead. It was reported that "there is virtually no public transportation" between the two places. Field offices have been closed without considering the needs of communities and without consulting the public they serve. This is just one example of many ways that the public is affected by the proposed changes in Vision 2025.

There is no question that in every community there should be a well-staff Social Security office. Despite what some may think, self-service is not applicable to every task. Filing for benefits is not as simple as pumping gas. Applying for benefits is a complex matter involving computations and comparisons. Errors often result in incorrect or delayed benefits, overpayments and other such headaches for both the public and the agency staff, who then must take time to "clean up messes". Let us not forget that fraud due to the proliferation of online services has caused the agency to recently issue bulletins regarding online theft of payments.

Vision 2025 severely limits the choices of beneficiaries. It reduces public options to using the "My Social Security" website or the 1-800 phone number, eliminating many basic essential services. It makes it impossible to complete simple, but important agency functions timely. The time honored, one-on-one assistance provided at field offices by agency staff that distinguishes Social Security from other agencies is the best approach. That is what makes this agency great. This reduces errors and ensures that the public gets the benefits to which they are entitled in a timely matter. The bait and switch to self-service, lack of service or no service at all is obvious. Don't be fooled by understatements about "world-class service". A rose by any other name is still poor public policy.

How to Navigate Basic EEO Questions thru AFGE

by Kathryn O'Neil

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If an employee feels like they have been discriminated against, the first step is for the employee to contact CREOS directly for EEO counseling. An employee has 45 calendar days from the date the incident happened to request EEO counseling. There are 9 bases covered by EEO laws:

Race

Color

Religion

Sex

National Origin

Retaliation/Reprisal

Disability

Age

Genetic Information

It is strongly recommended that a union representative be present to assist the employee thru the EEO Process. But remember, the COMPLAINT BELONGS TO THE COMPLAINANT. Union representative are there to assist a member, but it is their responsibility to make sure they follow through. The employee needs to visit and click on the EEO Process tab to start the process at <http://chinet.ch.ad.ssa.gov/creosweb/index.html>.

Please contact Kathryn O'Neil with any questions or for assistance.

Good News for Field Offices!

New funding strengthens field offices and is ensuring that Social Security remains accessible with the \$1.1 trillion CROmnibus that keeps the government operating through September 2015. A minimum of \$100 million in new funding for administrative costs and the possibility of an additional \$200 millions more based on the bill language limiting SSA spending on Program Integrity or fraud reduction activities, AFGE has been pressing very hard for these additional measures to save field offices and to limit the closing of additional field offices. The bill states that the Commissioner must provide an opportunity for the public and other affected parties to be involved in any office closings, consolidations or cuts in operating hours. The agency is required to follow strict timetables for notifying the public of office closures and must allow for public comment and input.

This funding commits the agency to provide services like the benefit verification letters and SSN printouts. The Commissioner has been directed to 'ensure the maximum amount of flexibility' in assisting people in verifying their social security numbers at field offices — this service was eliminated in the summer of 2014. The funding also includes monies for SSA to resume the mailing of Social Security Statements. AFGE has worked diligently to ensure that the importance of the field office in providing necessary services to the public is not minimized or overlooked. Office hours for field offices have recently been expanded to 4:00 p.m. on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. While there are positive aspects of this change there are also issues such as the agency's inadequate hiring and the inability to properly staff field offices and properly serve the public due to the limited hiring the last few years. The hiring in 2013-2014 did not replace the loss of employees from the past six years. AFGE will continue to be pushing for additional hiring and our EBoard will be in Washington, DC next month echoing this sentiment.

Meet newly elected Vice President Alicia Knowles

I attended undergraduate school at Hanover College majoring in Psychology and Foreign Languages. I then went to work for the State of Ohio with the Department of Children's Services as a risk intake investigator. During my time working for the state I attended graduate school at the University of Cincinnati in the Clinical Counseling Psychology and Romance Languages and Literatures departments.

While working in Cincinnati I served on the Hispanic Commissioner's Board. It was through the Commissioner's Board that I first came in contact with the Social Security Administration.

I interviewed with the Social Security Administration through the Cincinnati Downtown Office. I was placed in the New Albany, Indiana office and trained in the Louisville, Kentucky office. I worked for three years in the New Albany, Indiana office as an SSI Claims Representative. I transferred to the Madison, Indiana Office as a Medicare Expert and a Generalist Claims Representative. Over the last nine years I am working as a Social Security Claims Representative taking disability and retirement claims. I have been with the agency for twelve years this September.

I have been an active member and or representative of the union since my transfer to the Madison Field Office. Over the years I have seen many changes within the Administration. It suffices to say several of the changes have not been beneficial to employees. It is to this end that I wish to contribute to the EBoard and Union body for the betterment, future existence and wellbeing of our loyal employees.

Seven in 10 Federal Managers Sometimes Predetermine Who Will Fill Job Vacancies

By Eric Katz

The federal hiring process has become too complex to ensure the open and fair selection of new employees, according to a new report.

The Merit Systems Protection Board outlined the variety of authorities agencies have to hire workers, concluding from analysis of data from the Office of Personnel Management and its own surveys that the selection process often predetermines candidates and does not promote a diverse workforce. The ever growing number of hiring authorities restrict the size and makeup of the applicant pool and, at times, allow agencies to circumvent the core principles that guarantee a fair civil service, MSPB found.

Federal laws set the bare minimum steps agencies must take to ensure fairness, MSPB said, but they are still given a large degree of latitude in deciding how to select applicants. That flexibility can empower agencies to effectively recruit the best candidates, but it can also provide an avenue for improper exploitation, knowingly or otherwise, the report said. Ultimately, agencies must strike the right balance to ensure both a representative and well-engaged workforce.

Because the federal government requires much stricter hiring regulations and higher costs than those borne in the private sector, agencies have long looked for ways to reduce their burden. The evolution of the hiring process has led to a "near complete decentralization" and a proliferation of unique authorities for agencies across government, MSPB said.

The burdens should not be completely alleviated, MSPB warned.

"These management costs are necessary to the ultimate goal of a strong, highly qualified, stable merit-based civil service that serves the public's interest over the long term rather than at the pleasure of current political leaders," the board wrote in the report.

Overindulgence in circumventing those costs has consequences. For example, MSPB found one-third of federal vacancies were open for less than two weeks. Agencies should strive to overwhelmingly keep positions open for at least two weeks, MSPB said, as it provides a greater opportunity for more qualified people to apply and creates the appearance of fairness.

Special authorities also allow agencies to over-hire from within. Slightly less than half of human resources personnel surveyed by MSPB said vacancies are open to all sources -- both internal and external -- all or most of the time. Agencies should take advantage of internal hiring in some cases, the report found, as it allows them to retain institutional knowledge; however, they must be careful to preserve openness in the process.

In a separate survey question fielded by MSPB, 79 percent of HR respondents said hiring managers had a specific candidate in mind for a vacancy prior to it being posted "at least some of the time." Agencies are prohibited from crafting an announcement or candidate assessment to favor a particular candidate.

Just 37 percent of vacancies in 2012 were filled using externally competitive authorities, according to the report. That is down from 50 percent in 2000. The gap has been filled by veterans preference hiring, and, to a lesser extent, special direct hiring authority OPM gives agencies when they have an immediate need or shortage of workers.

HR offices possess far less power than they used to, as their workforces were cut dramatically in the mid-1990s. This has made it increasingly difficult for agencies to ensure compliance with hiring laws and regulations, MSPB said.

The board suggested agencies should implore managers to cultivate the values of fair and open competition and ensure they are only using restrictive hiring practices when absolutely necessary.

"Separate from the issue of discrimination against protected classes, there is a need to bring in new ideas and maintain the faith of the American people that the civil service is equally open to everyone," MSPB wrote.

It also suggested OPM step up its oversight of restrictive hiring practices, and that Congress look at ways to make the entire process "simpler, more transparent and more widely used."

Benefits for AFGE Members

When you join the union you have access to many AFGE benefits. By using one or two of the programs, you can save as much as your annual union dues. Discounts on travel, flowers, insurance, health clubs, pet insurance, pet food and medications, legal services, technology, theme parks and entertainment. Please visit:

<https://www.afge.org/Index.cfm?Page=MemberBenefits>

President Obama proposes six weeks maternity leave

Federal employees will be given at least six weeks of paid leave to care for new children under plans unveiled by the White House to kick-start legislative efforts to close the gap in family benefits offered by the US and other wealthy countries.

Democrats have been pushing for better maternity and sick leave rights for over a decade in Congress with little success, but plans by Barack Obama to back the passage of a Healthy Families Act with the executive action for government workers and \$2.2bn of new funding for state efforts would be the first time the president has acted on the issue.

The long-stalled legislation would also allow workers in the private sector to earn up to seven days a year of paid sick time and although it is still opposed by most Republicans, Obama's intervention ahead of the State of Union address next week suggests Democrats hope to make the policy an issue for emerging 2016 presidential candidates.

In a briefing for reporters, White House officials said its plan to grant six weeks of paid leave to workers at federal agencies would be "an advance" on their future leave entitlements aimed specifically at new parents rather than an additional grant, which would be difficult to provide without legislation.

Announcing the plan separately in a blog on LinkedIn, senior adviser Valerie Jarrett said the US remained "the only developed country in the world that does not offer paid maternity leave".

"At a time when all parents are working in more than 60% of households with children, and 63% of women with children under the age of five participate in the labor force one fact is resoundingly clear: the fundamental structure of our workplaces has simply not kept pace with the changing American family," added Jarrett, who is also chair of the White House Council on Women and Girls.

The White House estimates 43 million private sector workers currently do have any paid sick leave and a survey of 185 countries by the International Labour Organisation suggests the US and Papua New Guinea are the only ones not to offer paid maternity leave.

But US business groups argue that small businesses in particular should be allowed to determine the benefits they offer to workers. "Our members are opposed to it because of real costs — and in a philosophical sense, they're opposed to it because they don't want the government telling them what to do," a spokesman for the National Federation of Independent Businesses recently told The Hill magazine.

A breakthrough, however, will probably depend on whether the issue is embraced by a new generation of Congressional leaders.



Our fearless leader, President Bill Price, took time out from delivering presents to address staffing shortages.

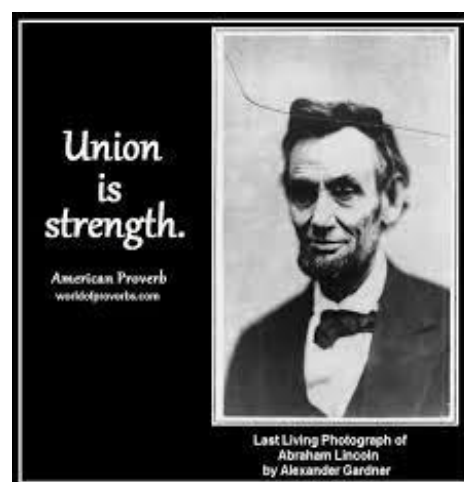
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