



NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SSA FIELD OPERATIONS LOCALS
AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO
Representing over 28,000 Social Security Employees working in over 1,300 field installations and 36 teleservice centers across the nation, Puerto Rico and Pacific Islands

April 24, 2020

The Honorable Andrew M. Saul
Commissioner
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Blvd
Baltimore, MD 21235

Dear Commissioner Saul,

On behalf of our 25,000+ field office, teleservice center, and card center employees, I appreciate the hard work and difficult decisions that you and the SSA leadership team have had to make over the last several weeks. You have adapted to the challenges of these unprecedented times with creativity and speed. The challenges presented by Covid-19 have been a reminder that Americans are resilient and adjust quickly to change. We are proud of the adaptability of SSA employees, our managers, and the public we serve.

Despite the seemingly insurmountable challenges of taking a nationwide organization of 55,000+ employees to telework essentially overnight, SSA has found a way to continue service the public while protecting the health and safety of its employees and their families. Thank you for making the quick and correct decision to send employees home as part of the nation-wide push to flatten the curve. Telework has improved the American public's experience with the Social Security Administration, increasing employee efficiency and customer satisfaction.

The American workplace is not only different in the short-term, but will also likely never be the same. As President Trump and Administration leaders begin to reopen the economy, and transition to the 'new normal' for the federal workforce, I would like to clearly state AFGE Council 220's position:

- In the short term, SSA employees should be allowed to continue teleworking.
- Teleworking should be the Agency standard, with all case work that can be handled “*virtually*” required to be handled via telephone and internet.
- Following the IRS model, a single field office should be opened in every congressional district for necessary in-person meetings, trainings, etc.

Below, I will outline the benefits to the American public, SSA, and employees of this arrangement.

Workforce Deployment

Social Security Administration managers have long struggled with the challenge of properly staffing field offices and telephone service centers. In rural communities, finding and retaining staff presents a challenge. Additionally, work flow in rural offices may not reach the per-employee levels that it does in a metropolitan area. In contrast, managers in major metropolitan areas may have an easier time hiring

but struggle to meet the demand for services. A GS-11 in one office may take just two to three initial claims in a day, while a person in the same position in another office may handle six to eight claims in that same period.

Migration patterns in America continue to change. Increasing numbers of people are leaving the hustle of California to settle into more rural Idaho. Demographers predict that the young adults entering the workforce today may be more likely to settle in mid-sized cities and towns rather than in the major metropolises so appealing to the prior generation. Geographically, the demand for SSA services will evolve with the change's demographics. This will, over time, mean employees are not deployed where they are most needed.

The Covid-19 crisis has pushed managers and employees to work together to deploy solutions to handle cases across our great nation. In the long-term, a virtual workforce would allow phone calls, initial claims, and post-entitlement actions to be taken in a timely manner, from anywhere at any time. Managers would be able to assign casework equitably, ensuring the public receives timely service and driving up customer satisfaction metrics. Ultimately, there is no reason a claim from Chicago could not be handled by a specialist in Wyoming. I have confidence that with creativity and ingenuity, a virtual workforce would be better able to handle the demands of casework efficiently and accurately.

Health and Safety

The nature of our work means that employees and the public visiting our office are interacting in close proximity with some of the most vulnerable members of the population. Recognizing that fact, you and your leadership team were quick to act for the health and well-being of SSA employees and the public by ordering all SSA employees to work from home. Because of your leadership, we prevented an outbreak of Covid-19 from taking out large numbers of SSA employees. In the current crisis, most field offices report zero cases of ill employees. The contrast in outcomes between ignoring the crisis and offering courageous leadership is striking.

Prior to the current pandemic, employees were encouraged to stay home if they felt they may have a contagious illness. A headache or cough may keep an employee concerned about the health of his colleagues or the public he serves home for a day. In the virtual workplace, minor health issues become irrelevant. In multiple studies of the private sector, the hours lost to illness after telework was implemented dropped *significantly*.

It is clear that the Covid-19 crisis will continue until a vaccine or cure is identified. Until that time, it is likely that social distancing measures will remain in place. In some cases, a second round of stay at home orders may be issued. Additionally, flu season will be upon us again this fall and every year after. Continuing to protect employee health, through Covid-19, the annual flu season, and the regular contagion of viruses that run through our workplaces, would seal your legacy as a leader who truly cares about his employees.

Increased Efficiency

The transition to agency-wide telework during this trying time has increased employee morale and satisfaction. Because employees are not triaging walk-in members of the public or explaining to customers why they cannot be helped that day, they are better able to handle their caseloads. The answer rate for calls into the field offices has increased from 70% to 95% since agency-wide telework

was implemented. With time, and more equitable distribution of calls as geographic limits are removed from casework, I believe it is reasonable to expect the call answer rate to rise as high as 99%. Employees are often challenged interpersonally when dealing with one another in a brick and mortar office. We estimate that approximately 80% of all grievances, EEOs, and harassment complaints filed in the last year originated from bargaining unit staff wanting management to address issues with other employees in a different manner. Through telework, employees are able to focus on delivering timely, effective, and accurate service to the American public. Ultimately, this should result in greater efficiency, fewer errors and a cost savings to the Agency and the American public.

Cost Savings

Maintaining approximately 1300+ field offices, teleservice centers and card centers is incredibly expensive and an unnecessary burden on taxpayers. Landlords are able to lock the Agency into lengthy contracts with terms that are unfairly favorable to the landlord. These facilities require maintenance, security, utilities, and other expenses. By transitioning to an almost entirely virtual workforce, the taxpayers would save hundreds of millions of dollars per year, in perpetuity.

By rebalancing casework portfolios to reflect capacity and not geography, SSA leadership may be able to reduce the need for a larger workforce, even as the American public continues to age.

SSA has made an investment in the computers, phones, and technology required to deploy a virtual workforce. This investment is a sunk cost; it makes sense to use it as a pivot point to transition the way SSA does business. Guiding SSA into a more efficient, more cost-effective future would allow you to leave the stamp of a visionary on the Agency.

One concern that has been raised about virtual offices for SSA has been the lack of printing ability. A centralized printing facility would be another way to implement cost savings, allowing for investment in significantly fewer, higher-quality machines, with fewer maintenance contracts and more efficient deployment. Other challenges raised by skeptics of the long-term viability of this approach will likely have similar, cost-effective solutions if we work together and think creatively.

Conclusion

SSA has continued to serve the public effectively and efficiently during the Covid-19 pandemic. Thanks to the creativity of SSA leadership and managers, the adaptability and flexibility of SSA employees, and the commitment of all of us to providing quality service to the American people, we have made the transition to an entirely virtual workforce almost seamlessly.

As you begin to plan for what the SSA field offices and telephone service centers will look like in the next phase of the Covid-19 response, and into the future, Council 220's leadership and members stand ready to support a plan that considers the health and safety of employees and the public, the effectiveness and efficiency of the workforce, and the cost savings to the American people. We look forward to collaborating with you to envision a 'new normal' for the Agency that will carry us far into the 21st century – and beyond.

We would embrace the opportunity to meet with you, and/or Deputy Commissioner Black to discuss this transition and moving forward.

Sincerely,

/s/ Ralph C. de Juliss

Ralph C. de Juliis
President
AFGE Council 220

/s/ Peter J. Harris

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