

October 31, 2017

The Honorable Thad Cochran
Chairman, Senate Committee on Appropriations
Room S-128, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Cochran:

As I suspect is the case for many Senators, I am increasingly hearing from my constituents about understaffed Social Security offices that cannot keep up with growing caseloads. Claims, appeals and even routine inquiries are taking longer to process, resulting in widespread frustration and sometimes, significant financial hardship. It is also affecting the morale of many Social Security employees. Social Security is one of the most successful government programs in our nation's history, and we must not undermine it by underfunding routine operations.

That is why I am writing today, to encourage you to appropriate at least \$13.89 billion for Social Security Administration operations funding for FY18. That amount would bring staffing back up to a level needed to provide adequate customer service for the tens of millions of Americans who routinely communicate with and depend on the agency.

Nearly 62 million Americans will receive Social Security benefits this year – and that number is growing, especially as the population ages. In fact, just since 2010, the number of people receiving old age and survivors benefits increased by 17 percent, and disability insurance beneficiaries increased by five percent.

Yet, over that same period, Congress has *cut* the agency's operating budget by 16 percent, after adjusting for inflation. Nationally, the Social Security Administration has lost more than 10,000 employees, 64 field offices have closed and many others have reduced hours. In my state of Vermont, one field office alone has seen staffing fall by almost 30 percent.

The simple fact is that fewer staff are being asked to do more work, and this is having a serious impact on worker morale and customer service. The constituent caseworkers in my Vermont district office are receiving an increasing number of Social Security related cases, and many involve concerns about client service. One Vermonter was on hold for 80 minutes with a local field office, and disconnected several times, before getting through to a live person. Others have had to wait many months for the agency to correct relatively simple payment issues.

Of course, this is a national problem. In 2010, more than 90 percent of all new applicants for Social Security could schedule an appointment within three weeks, but by 2015, fewer than half could. More than one in eight callers to SSA's toll-free hotline got busy signals last year and nearly half were on hold for so long that they hung up before connecting. That is unacceptable.

Moreover, with a backlog of more than a million cases, it now takes Social Security an average of 628 days to make a decision on a new application for disability benefits, the longest time ever. And it doesn't end there – several Vermonters told my office that they had to wait *an additional* four to eight months after receiving a favorable decision, before receiving their first benefits.

Social Security is *the* major source of income for most of our elderly population, and for many people with disabilities. These delays have a real impact on their ability just to get by.

The budget cuts are all the more outrageous because the agency's core administrative budget does not come from the Treasury's general fund, but rather, from the payroll contributions made by workers and employers that go into Social Security trust funds. As you know, those trust funds have an accumulated reserve of \$2.8 trillion, which will grow even higher this year, with a projected surplus of \$59 billion in 2017.

The President's FY18 budget proposal had a modest increase of \$100 million for Social Security operations. While a step in the right direction, I strongly believe we should increase funding to *at least* \$13.89 billion to restore the 16 percent reduction in funding since 2010. Even that would not account for the increase in caseload since then, but it would at least make-up for lost ground.

I appreciate your consideration of this request, and I look forward to working with you on this critically important issue. We must do everything we can to provide excellent service to all new applicants and current beneficiaries, including the tens of millions of Americans who have paid into the Social Security system their entire lives.

Sincerely,



Bernard Sanders
Ranking Member
Senate Budget Committee