# Social Security Official Asks House for More Customer Service Funding

The SSA call center and field office crisis affects Medicare administration as well as retirement income benefits.

By Allison Bell | May 18, 2022

The Social Security Administration needs more money to solve its customer service problems, a top SSA official told lawmakers Tuesday.

SSA handles customer service for Medicare as well as for the Social Security retirement income and disability insurance programs.

Grace Kim, deputy commissioner for operations at the SSA, said the agency is depending on Congress to supply the cash it needs to get service levels at its 24 call centers and 1,200 field offices up to acceptable levels.

SSA suffers from severe understaffing, the situation is getting worse, and "we are at our lowest staffing levels in 25 years," Kim said at the hearing, which was organized by the House Ways and Means Social Security subcommittee. "This has been driven by years of insufficient funding and hiring freezes, compounded by unprecedented attrition."

The subcommittee organized the hearing in response to reports of severe SSA service problems during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## What It Means

If you have clients that have any problems with their Social Security or Medicare benefits, such as complications caused by identity proofing and identity theft, their well-being may depend partly on how Congress and SSA handle the customer service concerns.

## The Background

The number of Social Security beneficiaries has increased to 65 million this year, from 54 million in 2010.

SSA's inflation-adjusted budget has fallen by 14% over that same period, to $13 billion in federal fiscal year 2021, which ended Sept. 30, 2021.

SSA now has a total of about 60,000 employees, including 43,000 employees in the field offices.

President Joe Biden's administration has proposed increasing SSA's operating budget to $14.8 billion in federal fiscal year 2023, which starts Oct. 1.

The proposed 2023 funding level would be 14% higher than the 2021 funding level, and 12% higher than the estimated funding level for the current fiscal year.

The COVID-19 pandemic added to SSA's challenges.

The SSA closed its field offices in March 2020 and moved as many functions as possible to call centers and online systems.

The agency reopened the field offices April 7.

"Reentry has been smooth," Kim said at the hearing.

But she reported that call volume and field office visit volume are extremely high.

Employee attrition levels are high, and the remaining employees say they feel their workloads are unreasonably heavy, Kim added.

## SSA Advocacy

Some insurance and financial professionals provide clients with direct help with SSA-related problems.

Others steer clients toward Medicare and SSA agency firms and nonprofit support programs.

Some witnesses at the House Ways and Means subcommittee hearing proposed program changes that could affect the current advocacy efforts.

Rebecca Vallas, a disability economic justice specialist at The Century Foundation, an organization that works with disability-related organizations and other organizations, suggested that SSA should create a "navigators" program, or assistance program, for people applying for Social Security disability insurance.

Depending on how it was structured, a new Social Security disability navigators program could compete with existing advocacy firms and nonprofit support agencies, or it could hire advocacy firms or nonprofit agencies, or both, to help it provide the new navigator services.

*Pictured: Grace Kim, deputy commissioner for operations at the Social Security Administration, testifies Tuesday at a hearing on SSA customer service problems organized by the House Ways and Means Social Security subcommittee. (Photo: House Ways and Means Committee)*