

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

The Social Security Administration (SSA), which administers our Social Security system at an extraordinarily low cost of under one percent of expenditures, is undergoing major, destabilizing changes. These changes threaten agency viability and the benefits of over seventy million current beneficiaries.

The Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), which appears to be engineering these major changes, has access to the most sensitive personal and confidential information – including Social Security numbers, lifetime earnings records, benefit computations, and even medical records– of hundreds of millions of U.S. workers and current beneficiaries. Former SSA Commissioner Martin O’Malley believes that DOGE’s actions pose a significant and imminent risk to the benefits paid by SSA.

The National Academy of Social Insurance, founded in 1986, annually awards a prize named in honor of Robert Ball, who served as Social Security Commissioner for eleven years under three Presidents (Democrats John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, and Republican Richard Nixon), to people whose work has significantly contributed to the U.S. social insurance system. We recipients of the Ball Award join in expressing our alarm at current actions of DOGE that threaten the viability of Social Security benefits for current beneficiaries and workers.

We write to warn of the risk that this interference with SSA’s vital operations poses to all who have a stake in our nation’s Social Security program. Social Security this year commemorates the 90th anniversary of its enactment in 1935 under the administration of Franklin Roosevelt. Throughout its extraordinary existence, SSA has provided retirement, survivor, and disability benefits to the

right people in the right amount at the right time, while carefully preserving the privacy of the personal data of workers and beneficiaries alike.

Congress needs to monitor vigilantly the changes being undertaken to ensure that accurate benefit payments will in fact be made on time. Economic security for millions of Americans is at stake.

An Acting Commissioner is currently leading the agency, until the U.S. Senate confirms a new Commissioner. The previous Acting Commissioner, a civil servant with decades of executive-level experience, was replaced after refusing to provide a DOGE team member with access to such sensitive information.

The unprecedented actions by SSA, presumably instigated by DOGE, have included, and reportedly will include, the following:

- **Personnel reductions:** Approximately 7,000 out of around 57,000 SSA employees will be either fired “for cause” or let go as “redundant.” It should be noted that being fired for cause or given an artificial “choice” to be reassigned to a significantly lower-paying position in another geographical location without moving expenses deprives the affected staff of severance pay and health insurance coverage, and blocks them from qualifying for unemployment insurance. These cuts, if effectuated, will reduce over twelve percent of the staff of an agency that is already laboring under a severe shortage of employees and a hiring freeze – this at a time when nearly 12,000 Boomers turn 65 each day. In addition to new terminations, many senior SSA staff have already been fired, announced their resignations, or taken early retirement. More departures loom in response to emails that advise them to take an “early out” or to accept a voluntary separation incentive payment, as they may lose their jobs through reorganization and elimination of their positions. Removal of these seasoned SSA professionals means a loss of vital institutional leadership and knowledge, which will degrade service to the public.
- **Field office closings:** In just its first six weeks in office, the current Administration has closed ten field offices. The General Services

Administration has been directed to terminate all federal leases. Closing leased Social Security offices will further obstruct access to benefits, especially by disability claimants but also by others, who need or want in-person assistance with their benefits.

- **Headquarters restructuring:** SSA's leadership structure is being reorganized and reduced to only five Deputy Commissioners, plus a Chief Actuary and a Chief Information Officer. Every Deputy Commissioner will be a political appointee – a major shift from the norm.
- **Elimination of divisions:** The Administration is closing the Office of Civil Rights and Equal Opportunity and the Office of Transformation, which has led efforts to improve efficiency, cut costs, and enhance customer service. The staff of these offices were fired “for cause.” The Administration also fired the SSA Inspector General, an odd move if the goal is truly to identify waste, fraud, and abuse.
- **Research terminations:** Among the programs being abolished is SSA's Retirement and Disability Research Consortium, a group of six university based research groups, whose elimination will deprive the public of important research on how to improve Social Security legislatively and administratively.

These actions come against the background of existing staff shortages that have already caused growing delays in processing benefits, especially claims for new disability benefits. Two million Disability Insurance applicants are now awaiting decisions—and the number is growing. Approximately 10,000 disability benefits applicants have died in recent years while awaiting the processing of their claims. Staff reductions will cause further delays and more deaths.

DOGE has also made false claims that SSA is paying benefits to many deceased individuals. In fact, SSA diligently identifies beneficiaries who die and immediately cuts off benefits.

An Inspector General study found that of the 88,000 people aged 100 or older in December 2020, only 44,000 were receiving benefits. (Starting in 1937, SSA has

been issuing Social Security numbers.) While nearly 19 million individuals with Social Security numbers had birthdays one hundred or more years ago, fewer than one-half of one percent – just 44,000 -- were receiving benefits in 2020. While it is possible that one or more of those benefits may be going out in error, DOGE has presented no evidence of this. But DOGE advocates spending millions of dollars to find and prune from SSA records the names of the remaining ninety-nine-plus percent who are not receiving benefits. Such a step would be pure waste, something that one might suppose an entity pledged to eliminate waste would shun.

DOGE meddling to date has hindered efficiency, not enhanced it. Multiple staff have spent thousands of hours in emergency meetings called to correct erroneous and unsupported allegations that people 150 years old or more are getting paid benefits. DOGE has fostered waste, the very problem it purports to want to solve.

The current Administration and some in Congress have issued statements claiming that SSA downsizing will not affect the payment of Social Security benefits. Payments come from the U.S. Treasury upon transmission of data by SSA. Getting benefits to the currently and newly eligible, and accurately determining how much those benefits should be, requires the work of current SSA staff and more.

Congress is duty-bound to monitor the changes currently being implemented to ensure that they do not reduce the access of current and new beneficiaries to the benefits promised under current law. The economic security of millions of Americans is at stake.

Signed by:

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- Virginia Reno, former SSA Deputy Commissioner for Retirement and Disability Policy

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(now the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services)

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