

UNITY

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SSA Scores Poorly In Nat'l Survey

The Social Security Administration was ranked 21st among 30 large federal agencies in this year's *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government Survey*. SSA placed 15th in the 2003 survey.

The *Best Places to Work* is the most comprehensive ranking of federal government organizations and is derived from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management's Federal Human Capital Survey of 150,000 executive branch workers. These rankings are designed to offer job-seekers insight into the best opportunities for public service. This year's results do not look encouraging for SSA.

The top ten places to work in the federal government, according to the survey are:

1. Office of Management and Budget
2. National Science Foundation
3. Nuclear Regulatory Commission
4. Government Accountability Office
5. Securities and Exchange Commission
6. National Aeronautics and Space Administration
7. General Services Administration
8. Environmental Protection Agency
9. Department of Energy
10. Department of State

The survey shows that, on average, scores are up nine percent, with three out of four federal agen-

cies experiencing an increase in employee engagement.

SSA, on the other hand, had a 40 percent decline in rank from 2003.

American University's Institute for the Study of Public Policy Implementation analyzed the results of the survey and concluded that the key drivers behind workplace satisfaction and engagement remain the same: effective leadership and a good match between employee skills and the mission of the organization.

Although there were significant differences in the size and mission of

the top ten government agencies, they shared a number of similar characteristics. These agencies have high levels of interaction with employees, emphasize employee feedback, and promote a collegial environment. Some also rotate assignments to ensure fresh thinking and others frequently use student loan repayments. In other words, the agencies encourage employee involvement, provide rewards to encourage loyalty and attract the best and the brightest.

SSA's fall in the rankings are

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Union Testifies On New Disability Plan

AFGE Council 220 President Witold Skwierczynski provided testimony to the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Social Security and Human Resources regarding the agency's proposed changes to the disability determination process. He cited numerous concerns and objections.

"Although Commissioner Barnhart claims to have met with all interested parties...senior SSA officials in the regions had no idea what the proposal would look like," Skwierczynski said. He also pointed out that very little information was provided to the union, which later learned that the design of the new disability proposals were created by a small team that was "sworn to secrecy."

The Council President told Congress that AFGE concluded SSA was not interested in the union's input and tried to discourage employees from speaking out against the new plan by issuing a directive forbidding employees from using agency equipment or time to offer comments. The agency also instructed all employees, in-

cluding employee union representatives, that they could only respond to the new proposals as *private citizens*.

"This is an unprecedented effort by the agency to stifle comments and constructive criticism from the employees who will be expected to make a new process work," Skwierczynski said.

In his testimony, Skwierczynski stated that the new plan's intent to expedite the disability determination process would be better served by adding more staff to do the job. He noted that the agency never recovered from the loss of nearly 20,000 positions in the 1980s, most of them from front-line service delivery functions. Further, electronic processes such as EDCS and CPMS have proven to be far too time-consuming to navigate and too error-prone.



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SSA Ranked 21st in Best Work Place Ratings

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commensurate with its management style. SSA does not encourage employee participation. In fact, it is going in the opposite direction. The agency has recently terminated committee meetings with employee representatives across the country—some of which have been meeting regularly for decades.

SSA is a highly centralized bureaucracy that is now run by ideologues with a political agenda: privatization of Social Security. There also seems to be a commitment to reducing services to the public because of their inherent expense.

The agency steadfastly refuses to provide for repayment of student loans to attract and retain employees, despite AFGE's entreaties to do so.

Not only are employees mistrust, but central, regional and area level management does not have confidence in mid-level management to make decisions. Thus, SSA has become one of the most micromanaged of federal agencies.

If employee involvement is one of the hallmarks of *Best Places to Work*, then one can understand why SSA is on the wane.

Another characteristic of *Best Places* is an agency's investment in improved training and development programs. But, once again SSA comes up short with almost no career development program for the vast majority its employees. And, despite the almost universal panning of Central Office's prized interactive video training (IVT), the agency continues to rely on this failed training format because of the reduced costs.

As bad as SSA is, there are worse places to work according to the survey. The bottom three federal agencies are Department of Education, Homeland Security and the Small Business Administration.

Here are some *FAST FACTS* about this years survey:

- In 2005, one out of every three federal agencies scored higher in employee satisfaction and engagement than the private sector average.
- Overall, 75 percent of federal organizations experienced an increase in their scores between 2003 and 2005
- On average employee engagement is up nine percent at the 30 largest federal agencies and five percent at smaller agencies.
- The three subcomponents and small agencies with the highest scores are the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, National Science Foundation (San Francisco) and the Boston EPA office.
- The "Best in Class" workplace dimensions with the biggest increases since 2003 are Teamwork (4.6 percent), Effective Leadership (4.3 percent) and Training and Development (4.1 percent).
- The biggest increases in the past two years occurred at OMB, the Depts. of State and Justice.

Medicare Apps Dumped on the Field

The union has raised concerns about work from the new Medicare prescription drug program that was originally to be addressed by the Data Operations Center now being sent to Field Operations sites. Mike Teefy, who was on the labor-management negotiating team that bargained over Medicare Part D workloads, offers his perspective on recent developments:

...the Agency has again under funded and under estimated the magnitude of a significant law change while adopting the administration's position of never being at fault on anything.

When we were at the [bargaining] table, they insisted that the form would be very user friendly. Additionally, they said the field would only be required to do the work if the WBDOC could not resolve the problem in three calls to the claimant.

We told them repeatedly at the table that you are dealing with people who are in their 70s and 80s who can't see very well, who don't like to complete forms because they are unsure of what the question means and seniors who don't like to give information on how much they have; who don't like long distance phone calls from Pennsylvania asking them questions about their SSN, bank account and stocks and bonds. In addition the IRS interfaces are for 2003 or 2004 and the question asking about resources is for information in 2005.

The first information that the FO received which indicated there was a problem was when the cadres got the work dumped on them and then when they couldn't handle it they passed it out to the field offices. Given the current climate and the problem with Official Time it was just one more straw.

Additionally, SSA does not want to bargain anything that they have screwed up since the new agreement would be an acknowledgement by the Agency that they did screw up. It is just another example of ineptitude on their part and their total disregard of the American public and the seniors we provide service to. They still keep on insisting that when the [expletive deleted] really hits the fan in January 2006 and seniors aren't or can't get their Meds that the public is going to accept the Agency position of field office and TSR employees telling these seniors to call 1 800 Medicare and quit calling or going into SSA for help.

(See related article on page 4.)

From Around The Nation

Happy Anniversary

(Gainesville, Fl.) As August 14, 2005 approached, AFGE Council 220 Representative Matthew Marsh noticed that SSA was dilatory in announcing any recognition of the agency's 70th anniversary. In fact, it wasn't until after the union raised concerns about this omission that regional commissioners and other SSA officials finally sent out messages to employees regarding SSA's birthday.

Council President Witold Skwierczynski pointed out that this would have been the first time in 70 years that the agency did not celebrate its anniversary.

Some began to wonder if SSA wasn't just another federal agency that was being run by political appointees who were more interested in undermining its operations than promoting the good works that government can do.

But, eventually, SSA sent out a few tepid comments lauding the program. Many still questioned, however, why the agency had to be embarrassed into doing it.

With that in mind, Marsh considered the possibilities and came up with several reasons for management's delay:

...too busy plotting SSA's demise to celebrate Social Security's 70th year of success.

...skipping Social Security's 70th birthday to go shopping for a cas-ket.

...too obsessed with private accounts to acknowledge SSA's 70 years of accomplishment.

Claimant Shoots At Office, Kills Self

(Greenville, TX.) A Hunt County woman opened fire on the Social Security office and then took her own life.

Constance Hembly, 57, shot

News

her .38 caliber handgun three times into the SSA office glass doors and then fatally shot herself. Local police could not find a motive for her actions.

Daryl Whitten, AFGE Local 2727 Treasurer, reports that at the time of the incident there were only three bargaining unit members and the manager inside of the office, none of whom were hurt. The office guard had already left for the day.

The Employee Assistance Program was used to address any concerns related to the incident.

Security remains a significant concern for the union; but SSA continues to refuse to provide metal detectors for stand-alone offices, despite the fact that weapons can be brought into offices, creating a potential threat to employees and the public we serve.

The agency's main concern: the cost.

SSA Nixes Union Time

(National) AFGE Union officials around the country have indicated that SSA is preventing them from using contractually and statutorily guaranteed representational time. Union representatives have had to request annual leave to speak with employees who wish to file grievances or EEO appeals. These cases are being referred to AFGE lawyers to obtain back pay and attorney fees.

Some of the denied time is affecting those union officials who have been particularly active in the past.

AFGE has filed a national grievance charging SSA with numerous violations of the new contract. The grievance asks for monetary relief for the agency's transgressions.

Congress: Cut Federal Retirement

(Washington, DC) AFGE National President John Gage denounced a group of 100 Republican congresspersons who have recommended that the costs associated with the clean-up of Hurricane Katrina be paid for by reducing federal employee retirement and health benefits.

"What this group is calling for is nothing less than breaching the covenant Congress made with the federal employees who devoted their careers to serving the American people—usually for salaries significantly less than those earned by their counterparts in the private sector," Gage said.

While Congress is devising ways to diminish federal employees income and benefits, Gage pointed out that these same workers are "living in tents in Louisiana and Mississippi, wading through fetid waters and working 12- and 16-hour shifts in order to provide relief to the citizens in the affected regions."

Gage strenuously objected to this "right wing" attack on vulnerable workers and promised to fight this attempt to reduce federal employees rights and benefits.

(See related article on page 7)

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More Problems With Medicare Part D

A FGE Council 220 is taking a grievance to arbitration over the agency's actions covering "Medicare hires" and alleged violations of memoranda of understanding about the new vacancies and workloads generated by the new prescription drug program called Medicare Part D.

Mike Teefy, the union's chief negotiator on Medicare Part D and an AFGE Council 220 Representative from Vancouver, Washington,

advised that there have been a host of problems with agency management over the new hires, notices to employees about vacancies, and redistribution of the workload to the Field.

"Management had agreed to a *Letter of Understanding* in which it committed to hiring as many internal candidates as it could for this new work," Teefy said, "but, it appears that if you were a female service representative with 15 or more years of service, the agency deliberately tried to exclude you from the process."

Data gathered by Teefy shows that some SSA regions made an effort to hire a mix of internal and external candidates. But, others did not.

"In the New York region there were 195 new hires. Only five were internals," Teefy said, pointing out that the Boston region was another area where few internal candidates were considered.

Teefy said that the union had asked on numerous occasions where the job announcements could be found but SSA was not forthcoming. "When we told them that employees could not find the vacancy announcements, management said it was the employee's responsibility, not theirs," he said.

"Management told us at the [bargaining] table that this was a great opportunity for internal promotions and that for every internal promotion we could backfill positions; but, this doesn't appear to be what happened."

The agreement also required local management to alert employees to the new vacancies, but the union learned that many employees were discouraged from filing and in some cases misinformed.

"Some managers told service representatives that you needed a college degree to be promoted. That was not true," Teefy said.

While this case proceeds to arbitration, Medicare Part D has generated workload concerns in many offices. Although the Data Operations Center was scheduled to process the new workload, employees were also asked to work 16 hours a week of overtime to meet an annual wage reporting deadline. But, when the *user friendly* Medicare applications turned out to be not so user friendly and generated 700,686 exceptions, the work was redistributed to Field locations.

Social Security Popular As Ever

The heated debate over whether Social Security should be radically revamped to include private accounts has actually strengthened public support for the program, according to a major new AARP survey marking the 70th anniversary of the system.

Even though the administration has been campaigning for private investment accounts carved out of Social Security funds, "support for the current system has increased, not decreased, in 2005 among both working and retired Americans," says William E. Wright, AARP senior research adviser and the lead author of the study.

The percentage of people who believe Social Security is one of the most important government programs increased from 61 percent in 1995 to 65 percent in 2005. And in 2005, 77 percent said they disagreed with the statement *Most people I know could do very well without Social Security*.

Confidence in the program, which dropped from 46 percent in 1985 to 36 percent in 1995, actually increased in 2005 to 40 percent.

Even though the survey questioned values and attitudes—no policy proposals—Wright says, "These underlying positive views of Social Security are what will shape the policy options."

In the 2005 survey, people also were asked which source of income they relied upon most in retirement. Social Security came in first with 30 percent, while savings/investments and 401(k)s tied for second with 18 percent each. Pension payments ranked third at 14 percent.

The debate over private accounts may also have educated Americans. The percentage of respondents who consider themselves "very well informed" about Social Security doubled between 1995 and 2005, from 14 percent to 24 percent.

From AARP Bulletin, Sept. 2005

Letters to the Editor

Dear UNITY;

According to your article, AFGE feared that if the contract went to FSIP, there would be a much worse contract, so they caved in and did as they were told. How could this have been worse? A stupid dress code? For this, you bargained away rights that took years to win.

Even if the worst case scenario played out, as long as the Union did not give in and stood up for their position and the stated position of the majority of the membership, they did not lose face. Even if the FSIP ruled 100% against the Union (and there is absolutely no proof that this would have happened) there is a huge difference between being forced into something against your will and agreeing to it.

Once the Union has agreed to something, then it no longer has a leg to stand on. Management now gleefully can do whatever they want because the Union agreed to it and signed on the dotted line. The show of defiance at the Woodlawn ceremony when [national president] John Gage refused to put his signature on the document was a futile gesture.

Christine Mulholland
Steward
Milwaukee, Wi.

Dear Christine;

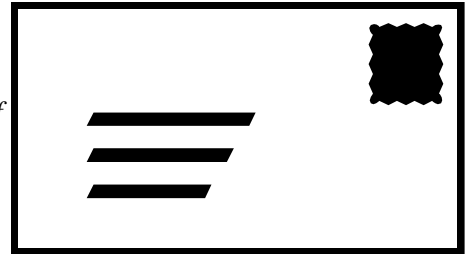
You can save face and still wind up losing your shorts.

The AFGE-SSA contract negotiations weren't about saving face. They were about trying to retain employee rights and benefits in the face of a politically motivated attack against the SSA bargaining unit and the union that represents them.

AFGE was very concerned that if the negotiators couldn't reach an accord, that submitting our negotiations dispute to a pro-management, anti-labor Federal Service Impasses Panel (FSIP) would have resulted in a worse agreement than what the parties agreed to submit for ratification in April, 2005. This was the consensus of the AFGE Council presidents that represent all of the SSA components. It was also the opinion of AFGE General Counsel Mark Roth and AFGE national president John Gage.

In addition, AFGE Council 220 held a series of conference calls with Local presidents representing Field Operations employees across the nation, who also agreed that there was a strong likelihood of a worse contract being imposed on SSA workers by the FSIP should the impasse be submitted to them for disposition. This was based upon recent decisions by the FSIP against federal employee unions, not conjecture.

John Gage refused to sign the final "agreement" advising SSA



Commissioner Jo Anne Barnhart that her first obligation was to run SSA and not to implement the White House's "wrong-headed agenda" and chose not to honor the contract with his signature.

But, in the final analysis, the contract does not allow management to "do whatever they want." AFGE will enforce this agreement like we would any in the past.

But, if employees want to ensure the prospect for better contracts in the future, then we all need to become politically aware and actively support candidates for elective office who are our friends—the friends of working families and federal workers—and not those who endorse policies that jeopardize our work lives, our pocket books and our way of life.

Editor



Unions Continue to Provide Employee Benefits

A new report by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics demonstrates that belonging to a union continues to make a significant difference in workers' lives. For example:

- Eighty-eight percent of private sector union workers have access to retirement benefits through their jobs, compared with only 56 percent of nonunion workers.
- Seventy-three percent of union workers have access to defined-benefit pension plans, compared with 16 percent of nonunion workers.
- Ninety-two percent of union workers have access to job-based health care benefits, compared with 68 percent of nonunion workers.
- Seventy-three percent of union workers have access to job-provided dental care, 57 percent have vision care and 87 percent have prescription drug coverage, compared with 43 percent, 26 percent and 61 percent, respectively.
- Nonunion workers' required health insurance premiums were over \$1,000 more per year than what union workers had to contribute, on average.

- Union workers also are more likely than nonunion workers to have access to job-based life insurance (65 percent vs. 50 percent) and short-term disability benefits (67 percent vs. 37 percent).
- Eighty-seven percent of union members have access to paid holidays and 86 percent had paid vacations, compared with 75 percent and 77 percent of nonunion workers, respec-

tively.

- Fifty-eight percent of union workers are offered education benefits, compared with 48 percent of nonunion workers.
- Median weekly earnings for union workers: \$781. For nonunion: \$612.
- Union workers' average days of paid vacation: 15 days; nonunion: 11.75 days.

Go to AFLCIO.org for the full report.

AFGE Questions Dib Plan

(Continued from page 1)

Skwierzynski said, "Poor management decisions have been made by a stronger desire to look good than to be good." Congress was informed about management directives to "game the numbers" by taking unnecessary applications and statistical manipulation to make the agency "look good." The union suggested that these inappropriate practices have become institutionalized and now raise the question, "How can we fix a problem if we don't really know what's happening in the administrative process?"

The union questioned why SSA abandoned several experiments in disability claims processing that had positive results (Disability Claims Manager, Adjudication Officer and Project Network Case Manager). "These successful pilot programs were all well-received by the public and provided career opportunities," Skwierzynski said.

The new plan replaces the reconsideration process—where non-attorneys review cases—with an assessment by an attorney (Reviewing Official). AFGE believes it will be more difficult for OHA to overturn these decisions. In addition, the new process denies claimants a face-to-face meeting and places greater burdens on them to obtain evidence to prove their disability.

Skwierzynski also criticized the new demonstration project included in

the agency's proposals that would institute a time-limited basis for disability payments. The union charged that SSA political appointee Martin Gerry was instrumental in creating time-limited welfare programs in the past and that his *welfare reforms* should not form the foundation for Social Security entitlements.

The union recommended several changes to improve SSA's disability programs:

- Include SSA employees and AFGE representatives to address problems and craft solutions
- Provide proper staffing and resources
- Ensure consistent disability decisions in a more expeditious manner
- Maintain quality, in-person service and assistance at the field office level.
- Federalize the disability determination process (DDS)
- Revisit successful pilots such as the DCM and AO.

Finally, Skwierzynski urged congress to reconsider legislation that would provide SSA with appropriate funding to process its claims and post-entitlement workloads timely and accurately such as the Social Security Preparedness Act of 2000. "By taking these costs off-budget with the rest of the Social Security program, Social Security funds will be protected for the future," Skwierzynski said.



Congress Plans Cuts in Fed Retirement & Health

The federal government is spending more money than it has taken in and some in Congress want to find ways to save money as well as spend it. While deficit spending is not a new concept for Uncle Sam, the amount of the deficit is huge with some estimating we will hit \$450 billion in 2006.

Now there are promises to rebuild damage in the Gulf Coast states and another hurricane ripping up parts of Texas. The problem is that the federal treasury lacks the many extra billions that are needed. In order to save money, the planning has to start somewhere. Cutting back on federal spending is never popular, but federal employees will be especially interested in the latest proposals coming from Capitol Hill

PARKING FEES

According to a report from a congressional group that created "Operation Offset," the federal government has 200,000 parking spaces it gives away to federal employees or makes available at reduced rates. Charging employees for these spaces would save about \$1.5 billion over ten years according to the report as well as encourage feds to carpool.

CHANGING RETIREMENT CALCULATIONS FOR FEDS

The report doesn't say it, but paying less to retiring federal employees would certainly encourage some people to work longer and perhaps cut down on the brain drain as baby boomers are expected to start leaving government in droves over the next several years.

Currently, retirement payments are based on a *high three* average. Changing that average to the *high five* would save a lot of money. This would reportedly make the federal retirement system more closely resemble private sector retirement programs and save about \$5.2 billion

over ten years. But, the truth is that the private sector is moving away from defined-benefit pensions and encouraging 401(k) plans, that will rise and fall with the vagaries of the stock market.

"Changing that average to the high five would save a lot

CHANGING HEALTH BENEFITS FOR NEW RETIREES

The report also suggests changing the Federal Employee Health Benefits program for new retirees. Currently, more than 80 percent of new federal retirees continue their health benefits into retirement and the government pays 72 percent of the premium.

The "Operation Offset" plan would base the health benefits for new employees on their length of service while still allowing them to participate in the program. Employees with less than 30 years of service would lose approximately two percent of the government's contribution for

every year of service under 30 years.

Changing the way for calculating health benefits would save \$6.3 billion over ten years and, says the report, bring the way the government provides health benefits for retirees more in line with the private sector. There are 45 million *private sector* Americans without any health insurance.

The report also suggests temporarily forgoing pay raises for congress, cutting back on travel by the Department of Education employees, and reducing or eliminating a wide variety of other federal programs.

Typical of those comments made by government employees are these by a Forest Service employee: "Federal employees should not have to suffer because of a natural disaster. It's absolutely appalling to think that federal retirees will have to take cuts and end up working longer when we are spending billions of dollars on the war in Iraq."

Most of this article was from FedSmith (www.FedSmith.com).





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An Editorial

Barnhart Restricts Holiday Leave Usage

For many years, about 50 percent of SSA employees working in the agency's 1,300 field installations around the country were able to enjoy annual leave around the holidays, because the practice had been to grant that much time off. Claimants, who were also in the holiday spirit didn't want to spend their time at an SSA office either. So, the agency recognized this was a time of reduced public traffic and allowed employees to make generous use of their *earned* holiday leave.

But, SSA Commissioner Jo Anne Barnhart has changed things for 2005—for the worst. She has set an arbitrary limit of no more than 40 percent off during the winter holidays for all Field Offices. The rationale for this is the expectation of more office visitors who wish to apply for the new Medicare program, that some are humorously referring to as Medicare Part D(isaster) due to con-

fusing enrollment procedures and coverage gaps.

One must remember that the initial enrollment period for Medicare Part D begins on November 15 and ends six months later on May 15, 2006. Why Barnhart believes that there will be a rush on field offices during the Christmas/Chanukah holidays is a mystery. After all, it's not like Medicare Part D is a great program that one would choose as a gift for the winter solstice; but we are sure Barnhart will be thinking about those FO employees who must come into the office while she is home stirring the holiday nog!

It wouldn't be so bad if the commissioner and her cronies weren't sending all of those saccharin-laced messages or testifying to Congress about how great SSA employees are or how much Central Office management appreciates the dedicated efforts made each and every day, or, headquarters'

special appreciation for the outstanding and compassionate service rendered during the recent hurricane tragedies.

If they really cared, denying employees time off to enjoy the holiday traditions with their families is a strange way to show it.

But, let's face it, Jo Anne, you really don't care about SSA workers or else you would have instructed your national contract negotiators to bargain in good faith for a fair agreement instead of a mean-spirited assault against workers and their representatives.

Oops! We forgot. You are just a political appointee. A *clerk*, as you defined your job to one of our union leaders, who must just follow orders.

Lucky for you that most employees *are* dedicated. But, you can lean on workers only so much before they begin leaning back.



The Grinch