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## **SOCIAL SECURITY UNION PRESIDENT SAYS CONGRESS SHOULD DELAY IMPLEMENTATION OF NEW DISABILITY RULES**

WASHINGTON—Social Security union president, Witold Skwierczynski, today called on Congress to delay implementation of the new rules for processing disability claims until the full cost of the proposed changes – not just to SSA, but to the states and to the U.S. District Courts as well – can be determined. Additionally, the union recommended that the changes be implemented as a pilot program first. In testimony before the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Social Security, Skwierczynski rejected a plan by Social Security Commissioner Jo Anne B. Barnhart to change the process by which Americans are evaluated for disabling conditions and by which claimants may appeal a denial of benefits. Implementation of the new rules is scheduled to begin August 1.

AFGE long has argued that the new rules do little to improve service to disabled Americans while virtually guaranteeing that the entire disability application process will become more litigious. Under Barnhart's plan, the Social Security Administration would hire an army of attorneys to evaluate denied cases as they come in the door from the state officials who make the initial determination of eligibility.

"It's never a good sign when someone says 'I want you to meet my lawyer,' but that exactly how these new rules would greet disabled Americans who appeals their case in the event of a denial by state officials," said Skwierczynski. "The entire plan is a misplaced, misguided effort. The real focus should have been on correcting the disparity of disability approval rates from state to state. Approval of federal benefits should not depend on in which state an American lives."

Skwierczynski cited SSA data on disability benefit approval rates from state to state. In Maryland only 35 percent of disability claims are approved compared to 53 percent for the District of Columbia. Eight states have approval rates that are less than 30 percent (Tennessee, South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Ohio, Alabama, Missouri, and Oregon).

Skwierczynski said service to the public, including disabled Americans, will be harmed further by a new policy of replacing only 1 field office employee for every 8 who leave. According to Skwierczynski, every other segment of SSA has a higher ratio for filling vacancies. In some offices the number of staff is actually growing.

"SSA is a people-intensive agency. Our members interact with the public face-to-face or over the phone, answering questions, taking claims and providing other assistance. The agency has become increasingly short staffed in recent years. With the oncoming baby boomer retirement tidal wave, now is the absolutely wrong time to cut staffing levels at SSA," said Skwierczynski.

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*The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) is the largest federal employee union, representing 600,000 workers in the federal government and the government of the District of Columbia.*