



National Council of SSA Field Operations Locals
AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO

*Representing Over 28,000 Social Security Employees Working In Over 1,300 Field Offices and
36 Teleservice Centers Across the Nation, Puerto Rico and Pacific Islands*

July 17, 2009

The Honorable Charles B. Rangel
Chairman
Committee on Ways and Means
1102 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Max Baucus
Chairman
Finance Committee
511 Senate House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Rangel and Senator Baucus,

Since at least July 9, 2009, the Social Security Administration has been under attack from television and print media running stories about \$700,000 spent that week to bring 700 management officials to a Regional “training” conference at the five-star Arizona Biltmore Resort and Spa. FOX News in Phoenix, Arizona called for firing “everyone in the Department,” and used the opportunity to frighten viewers about future program insolvency, based in part on this expenditure from the Trust Funds.

AFGE applauds the Ways and Means Subcommittees on Social Security, and on Income Security and Family Support, for writing to SSA Commissioner on July 10 asking for information about the costs of similar conferences held in the last five years. The Union has become aware of many other management conferences that have either already taken place or are scheduled in the near future which involve hundreds of management officials. Many are being held in popular vacation sites. AFGE believes that all of these conferences constitute unacceptable waste of appropriated funds. SSA sought and received stimulus money to improve Agency computer systems and to process backlogs and anticipated high workloads. Management conferences in resort cities accomplish none of these goals. Improving management morale is likely when managers can dance, party, take extended lunches, “network”, and attend workshops to find out how they can improve their promotional prospects. Unfortunately, stimulus money was not appropriated in order for managers to improve their morale while front line bargaining unit employees are struggling to produce the work of the Agency and service the American public. Stripping San Francisco region offices of all managers who attended the Phoenix management conference at the Biltmore resort had the adverse affect of preventing the Agency from issuing emergency payments to eligible destitute SSI beneficiaries because such payments require management

approval. It's outrageous that SSA management had such a callous disregard for the public that they would party in Phoenix and fail to allow the needy to receive emergency checks for which they qualify.

AFGE has found out about the following SSA conferences in addition to the Phoenix debacle:

1. Boston MA 10/27-30/08 175 traveling participants
2. San Antonio TX 1/26-29/09 175 traveling managers. The hotel solicitation required that a bidding hotel be within 3 blocks of the San Antonio Riverwalk.
3. NY, NY 6/23-26 175 traveling management participants.
4. Bellevue WA 6/16-19 225 traveling managers at the Hyatt Bellevue.
5. New Orleans LA 6/22-26 225 traveling managers
6. San Francisco CA 7/13-16 150 ODAR managers from Falls Church headquarters meeting in CA
7. Ft. Lauderdale FL 8/10-12 325 traveling managers
8. Kansas City MO 8/24-27 180 traveling managers
9. Hunt Valley MD 8/18-22 300 traveling managers

We ask that you take this further, and request investigations by the Government Accountability Office and by the House and Senate as soon as possible, to prevent further harm to the reputation of our Agency and its hard-working front-line employees, and erosion in public support for the important programs that we administer.

It is essential that responsibility and accountability for any extravagant spending on management conferences be placed where it belongs, with Commissioner Astrue, and not with the employees we represent. They receive limited, substandard programmatic training, primarily by viewing "interactive" video transmissions, most of them taped, in their home offices. They do not get opportunities to travel at taxpayer expense to receive face-to-face training on subjects like the marketing of electronic service delivery, emotional intelligence, mentoring the generations, managing diverse people, or how to get ahead.

It is ironic, and sad, that front-line employees and the Agency's clients are increasingly steered toward self-service delivered through technology, while managers find that face-to-face meetings all over the country are necessary.

SSA officials who approved, condoned and participated in these abuses of taxpayer funds no longer deserve to maintain their positions in SSA. This outrageous scandal will hurt the reputation of the Agency for years to come. Please encourage President Obama to clean house in SSA and select new leadership who understand the role of the Agency in difficult economic times.

Sincerely,

Witold Skwierczynski