

CLOSING Social Security Offices DOES NOT “Put People First.”

February 2008

The number of people visiting Social Security offices in 2007 swelled by nearly a million visitors from the previous year. Despite that alarming increase, the Commissioner of Social Security (SSA) wants to close offices!

SSA’s criteria for office closure consideration are not completely known. Commissioner Michael J Astrue has told AFGE officials that offices with 15 or fewer employees in urban areas will be looked at as leases approach an expiration date. However, SSA has closed offices, as recently as February 1, 2008, in rural areas, forcing the public to travel more than 70 miles to get to the nearest office. SSA has also closed offices prior to lease expiration dates. The only consistent criterion is each office has 15 or less employees.

Currently, more than 600 of the 1300 SSA field offices have 15 or fewer employees.

Last month, AFGE notified each member of Congress, who had such an office in their district. (*Refer to OMB letter dated Nov 20, 2007*) AFGE believes the threat is real and should not be ignored.

In the past, SSA was responsive to protests made by the community, community leaders, local and state officials, and members of Congress. **However, that is no longer the case.** In spite of such efforts, SSA has closed the following offices in the last year:

- Burbank, CA
- Industry Hills, CA
- San Francisco Parkside, CA
- SF Western Addition, CA
- San Pedro, CA
- Bristol, CT
- Hallandale, FL
- Miami Central, FL
- Oskaloosa, IA
- St Louis NW, MO
- St Louis NE, MO
- Warrensburg, MO
- Auburn, NY
- Bay Ridge, NY
- Bronx River, NY
- Cheektowaga, NY
- Euclid, OH
- Brentwood, PA
- Carbondale, PA
- North Charleston, SC
- Nacogdoches, TX

Commissioner Astrue strongly believes that the public should seek assistance from the Internet and third party organizations, many that charge for services. (*Refer to talking points regarding Internet and Third Party involvement is Social Security claims*)

It has become very clear to the employees of SSA and AFGE that the only effective method to prevent unnecessary office closures is to request legislation to provide for Congressional oversight on decisions impacting Social Security offices. On January 24, 2008, Representative Brian Higgins (D/NY) introduced the [Social Security Customer Service Improvement Act, H.R.5110](#). AFGE urges you to support and sponsor this very important legislation to ensure that customer service is at a level that citizens deserve.

Section 1, (c) of [H.R.5110](#), provides procedures that SSA’s Commissioner must follow before closing an office. Those procedures include:

- Providing a detailed report to the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Social Security and the Senate Finance Committee outlining and justifying the process for selecting field offices to be closed or otherwise have limited access.
- Such report shall include—
 - an analysis of the criteria used for selecting field offices for closure or limited access;

- the Commissioner's analyzes and considers must include factors relating to transportation and communication burdens faced by seniors and the disabled;
- a cost-benefit analysis for each field office closure that takes into account:
 - the anticipated savings as a result of the closure;
 - the anticipated burdens, including communication and transportation burdens, placed on elderly and disabled citizens; and
 - the anticipated costs associated with replacing the services lost by the closure.
- The Commissioner must wait 6 months after the submission of the report to Congress to close or limit access to a Social Security field office.

Until such legislation is passed by Congress, AFGE urges each member of Congress to:

- Support to keep Social Security offices open in your district so that your constituents will have easy and quick access to the services they need and deserve.
- Let OMB Director Jim Nussle and SSA Commissioner Michael J Astrue know of your concerns about shutting down Social Security offices.
- Request SSA to identify any and all offices that may be targeted for closure.
- Request Commissioner Astrue for complete Service Delivery Assessments (SDA) for each office that provides service to your constituents. (The SDA will identify the office reviewed, the recommendations for change/no change in the service delivery, the service area demographics and workload data. The SDA also provides an accessibility assessment, a narrative analysis of the service area, and a description of the current service delivery methods, which include the percent of interviews completed on an appointment basis, teleservice and face-to-face service and outreach.)
- Contact the Chairpersons of Appropriations and authorizing committees that handle Social Security matters and let them know your concerns. Request hearings to determine SSA's rationale for dismissing the concerns of Congress, the local community, local and state elected officials, the employees of SSA and most importantly, the beneficiaries. The leaders are Representatives David Obey, James Walsh, Michael McNulty, Sam Johnson and Senators Arlen Specter, Tom Harkin and Max Baucus.

As of Fiscal Year 2008, Social Security will be at its lowest staffing level since 1972. We continue to lose personnel through retirement and attrition and very few are being replaced because of insufficient budgets. The Bush Administration and SSA Commissioner Astrue are reluctant to ask Congress for more staff but that is the only answer to this crisis, yet willing to reduce services to the public. AFGE strongly believes that SSA should be providing help through community-based field offices that offer full services. This could not be accomplished through further reductions of service to claimants and beneficiaries.

SSA pays benefits to about 50 million people every month. Every year, SSA employees handle more than 6 million new claims for Retirement, Disability, and Survivors benefits. SSA also process 18 million requests for Social Security cards and post 265 million annual earnings items for covered workers. We expect significant increases in the Continuing Disability Review (CDR) workloads and "no match" cases required by the Department of Homeland Security. These workloads will further challenge employees. All this is accomplished at less than 2% administrative costs, while private insurance companies have administrative costs of between 12-16%. **How does closing the field office in your district improve this record of service?**

In the mid-1980's, the American Federation of Government Employees uncovered Social Security's secret plan to close almost 800 field offices. With the help of Congressional offices and committees, we stopped this plan. **We need your help again!**