



# AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO

**Eric Bunn Sr.**  
*National Secretary-Treasurer*

**Dr. Everett B. Kelley**  
*National President*

**Jeremy A. Lannan**  
*NVP for Women & Fair Practices*

April 30, 2024

Honorable Tammy Baldwin  
Chair  
Labor, Health and Human Services,  
Education and Related Agencies  
Subcommittee  
Senate Appropriations Committee  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Shelly Moore Capito  
Ranking Member  
Labor, Health and Human Services,  
Education and Related Agencies  
Subcommittee  
Senate Appropriations Committee  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Robert Aderholt  
Chair  
Labor, Health and Human Services,  
Education and Related Agencies  
Subcommittee  
House Appropriations Committee  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Honorable Rosa DeLauro  
Ranking Member  
Labor, Health and Human Services,  
Education and Related Agencies  
Subcommittee  
House Appropriations Committee  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Baldwin, Chairman Aderholt, Ranking Member Capito, and Ranking Member DeLauro:

On behalf of the American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO (AFGE), which represents more than 750,000 federal and District of Columbia government employees in more than 70 agencies, I write today to urge your support for federal workers on the issues detailed below as you draft the FY 2025 Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies Appropriations bill.

AFGE recognizes the limitations that the 2023 Fiscal Responsibility Act has imposed on Senate and House Appropriators. As the FY 2025 appropriations process begins, AFGE urges appropriators to appreciate the fact that unless federal agencies have optimal staffing and resources, their ability to meet the needs and expectations of American taxpayers will be severely diminished.

## **AFGE Supports Increased Funding for the Social Security Administration (SSA)**

Chronic underfunding of the Social Security Administration (SSA), which provides benefits to more than 70 million people, has left the agency at a crisis point. Service levels have deteriorated while more Americans have turned to SSA for assistance. The result has been an increase in wait times for calls, in-person office assistance and disability claim decisions.



SSA employee morale is ranked the lowest in government, the result of inadequate resources, unrealistic work demands, and poor working conditions. High attrition rates are hurting the agency's ability to serve the public as highly trained and experienced employees leave the agency for better pay, benefits, and working conditions offered elsewhere. Meanwhile, SSA's workload is set to increase as nearly twenty million Americans reach retirement age over the next decade.

The recently-enacted FY 2024 Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Fiscal Appropriations includes \$14.2 billion for SSA's administrative expenses—an increase of \$100 million over FY 2023 and a rejection of cuts proposed in the House bill. This modest increase of a little over a half a percent fails to keep pace with rising costs. SSA once again saw its budget cut after adjusting for inflation. The agency will need more funding in FY25.

The administration has proposed funding SSA at \$15.4 billion for FY 2025 and AFGE supports that level as the minimum amount to keep the agency out of a public service crisis, but we believe that Congress should raise the Limitation on Administrative Expenses (LAE) budget to 1.2% of benefits. This would amount to a \$19.2 billion total appropriation in FY 25 and would reduce and eliminate backlogs in workloads and wait times. The Senate overwhelmingly confirmed Martin O'Malley to be the new commissioner in December, and it is time to give him the resources needed to rebuild the agency.

### **AFGE Urges the Committee to Upgrade to SSA Legal Assistants/Specialists and Customer Service Representatives:**

The SSA's Office of Hearings Operations (OHO) relies on Legal Assistants and Specialists to conduct a broad range of duties supporting the hearings and review work of the Administrative Law Judges. Over two-thirds of the represented personnel at OHO are in legal assistant or specialist positions. OHO recently consolidated duties from several specialized position descriptions, causing affected employees to perform more duties but without increased compensation. Many are called upon to perform duties beyond their grade without commensurate compensation or reclassification. Further, there are very limited opportunities for advancement based on current positions. Legal assistants suffered from an attrition rate of 10% or higher in most regions.

Customer Service Representatives are often the first people the public talk with when seeking assistance and are critical to serving the public efficiently. They have suffered from a high attrition rate of 22% according to the Social Security Administration, costing the agency valuable resources to recruit, train and season new workers. The G-8 salary designation does not reflect the complexity of the work they do or compare favorably to similar positions at other agencies.

AFGE encourages the Committee to take all necessary action to upgrade these positions, which have experienced historic levels of attrition in the few years. The upgrades are critical to ensuring the public can receive timely assistance over the phone and that OHO has the support staff to minimize hearing backlogs.

## **AFGE Urges the Committee to Fund a Student Loan Repayment Benefit and Child-Care Subsidy Program:**

SSA is the only large federal agency to not offer a student loan repayment benefit. AFGE encourages the Committee to appropriate funds for a student loan repayment benefit as part of increased SSA funding, in order to make SSA a more competitive employer. AFGE estimates that this proven recruitment and retention benefit would cost \$8.5 million a year, a very small but worthwhile investment for an agency of this size and importance. SSA is also one of a few agencies that does not offer a child-care subsidy. For a modest cost, Congress can improve SSA's ability to serve the public by ensuring trained and experienced workers do not leave SSA for better benefits at other agencies.

## **AFGE Requests Report Language Addressing Staff Shortages:**

SSA recently revised its Public Service Indicators for meeting the needs of the public, focusing on intake, but it faces inadequate dedicated processing time to reduce historic backlogs and restore program integrity. Employees who work in Workload Support Units intake 33% more than they can process in a 40-hour work week and have record backlogs of over 800 cases at a time.

This lack of dedicated back-end processing time is driving employee attrition and historic wait times for service delivery. Some 76 percent of AFGE's SSA members surveyed say that their workload demands are preventing them from doing their job to the best of their ability. SSA should restore dedicated backend processing time for employees and focus on increasing personnel at field offices and in frontline positions providing these services. AFGE requests the following report language:

“The Committee instructs SSA to revise Public Service Indicators to allow workers to focus more time on processing cases and reducing the backlog.”

AFGE also requests that Congress require SSA to review staffing needs and ratios of management to front-line workers and report to Congress its plan to provide appropriate staffing to meet reasonable Public Service Indicators by including the following report language:

“The Committee continues to recognize the staffing crisis at SSA and the need for the agency to be able to recruit and retain a skilled workforce. The Committee directs SSA to submit to Congress no later than 180 days after the enactment of this act, a review of staffing needs and ratios of management to front-line workers, including contact representatives, leads, claims representatives, and technical experts.”

## **AFGE Requests Report Language Directing SSA to Roll Back the Average Call Handling Time Goal at Teleservice Centers and Mandate Call Waiting Time Estimates to the Public:**

Since the creation of a national 800 number service, SSA leadership has properly opposed establishing an average call-handling time metric in order to evaluate employee performance.

SSA leaders opposed such a performance standard since they believed that employees should not be gearing their service to a clock but rather should be concentrating on providing customers comprehensive and compassionate service. Due to inadequate budgets and unprecedented attrition, SSA officials now believe that the clock should dictate service. Now SSA pressures employees to limit call times to under 9 1/2 minutes.

SSA has begun enforcing an unrealistic average call handling time of 9 minutes and 30 seconds on its 1-800 number general inquiry line, making it impossible for call center agents to provide proper customer service. The 1-800 number has added a call back feature and only provides the wait time estimate on a limited basis - only during a certain hourly period of the day. AFGE urges the subcommittee to expand the hourly period when the wait time estimate is provided to customers.

The increased use of the website and mySSA accounts for basic tasks has meant more calls now involve complex matters. SSA's inadequate phone system largely lacks the ability to tell callers the approximate wait times or the option for an agent to call them back when they are next in line for service. It also frequently disconnects customers, and several times the entire nationwide phone system has become overloaded and gone offline. After an average wait time of 35 minutes for callers, the agent often has to take several minutes to de-escalate the unhappiness of the customer before getting to the customer's issue.

The pressure to help customers in under 9 minutes and 30 seconds has helped lead to record high staffing attrition at the Teleservice centers of 22% according to the agency, which has meant even fewer trained agents to answer calls. AFGE encourages Congress to include language eliminating the average call handling time goal; agents should be encouraged to service each customer's needs courteously, efficiently, and completely without being rushed off the phone by a supervisor or downgraded in their performance evaluations. AFGE asks Congress to include the following report language:

“The Committee is concerned about the high staff attrition rates at Teleservice centers and the long waiting times for customers to get through to an agent. The Committee instructs SSA to eliminate the average call handling time goal to help customers and instead encourage every agent to service customer's needs completely. The agency shall report back to Congress no later than 90 days after the enactment of this act on its progress in eliminating counterproductive average call handling time goals.”

For questions or details on SSA requests, please contact Jeff Cruz at [jeff.cruz@afge.org](mailto:jeff.cruz@afge.org).

## **U.S. Department of Labor**

### **AFGE Supports Renovation and Restoration of National Personal Protection Technology Laboratory (NPPTL) Facilities:**

AFGE urges the Committee to include \$10 million in discretionary infrastructure funding to upgrade water and electricity at the NPPTL site in Bruceton, Pennsylvania. Currently, administrative offices and research labs experience power outages because of crumbling

infrastructure. NPPTL employees conduct scientific research to develop personal protective equipment (PPE) and personal protective technologies (PPT). This research keeps workers safe from workplace hazards to prevent disease and injury.

AFGE requests the Committee include \$15 million in capital improvement funds for the NPPTL Pittsburgh Building 141 renovation. This building was transferred from the Department of Energy (DOE) National Energy Technology Laboratory (NETL) to NIOSH and NPPTL. This funding will be used to finalize lab and office space to be used by NPPTL personnel which will allow them to close five buildings that need infrastructure repair. (This amount is significantly less than \$270 million which would be the cost of a new building.)

AFGE requests the Committee include language stating that funds shall be used to upgrade water and electrical utilities at the National Personal Protective Technology Laboratory (NPPTL) site to prevent outages within administrative offices and research labs. AFGE further requests language stating that funding shall be used for infrastructure repair, capital improvements and renovation of laboratory and office space for the National Personal Protective Technology Laboratory (NPPTL).

### **Personal Protective Technology (PPT) Program:**

#### **User Fees:**

AFGE requests the Committee include language stating that the National Personal Protective Technology Laboratory (NPPTL) user fees collected for leading the national respirator conformity assessment activities, including certification of respirators, will not expire with the fiscal year. NPPTL will retain these user fees through all future fiscal years. (Current language states that user fees for NPPTL are identified as either one- or two-year funding.)

### **AFGE Supports Increased Funding for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA):**

AFGE supports the Administration's FY 2025 request of \$658 million for OSHA, a modest increase from \$654 million in FY 2023 and the continuing resolutions that funded OSHA for the first half of 2024.

### **AFGE Supports Increased Funding for the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA):**

AFGE supports the Administration's FY 2025 request of \$280 million for MSHA, a modest increase from \$263 million in FY 2023 and the continuing resolutions that funded MSHA for the first half of 2024.

For additional information or questions on Department of Labor requests, please contact Fiona Kohrman at [fiona.kohrman@afge.org](mailto:fiona.kohrman@afge.org).

Thank you for your consideration of AFGE's requests as the full Committee and the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies Subcommittee develop the FY 2025 appropriations bill. Please contact the named staff should you have questions on any of these requests.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Julie Tippens". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Julie" being more prominent than the last name "Tippens".

Julie Tippens  
Director of Legislation

Cc: Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies Subcommittee members; Chairwomen Murray and Granger; Ranking Members Collins and DeLauro