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December 22, 2021

The Honorable Kilolo Kijakazi
Acting Commissioner
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21235

Dear Acting Commissioner Kijakazi:

I write to ask for information on what actions the Social Security Administration (SSA) is taking to strengthen overall customer service while ensuring the safety of the public and SSA employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. As you may know, I wrote former Commissioner Andrew Saul in June of 2021 to express my concerns about the loss of local, in-person service and its impact on the public's ability to obtain assistance from the SSA during the pandemic.

SSA benefits and services are vital to nearly all Americans. The overwhelming majority of workers contribute to Social Security, and SSA provides benefits that are a bedrock of financial security to approximately 70 million seniors, people with disabilities, children, and survivors through the Social Security and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs.

Notably, SSA provides a range of essential services at its field offices, which number more than 1,200 nationwide. For example, SSA field offices help individuals apply for benefits and determine whether disability benefit applicants meet the agency's non-medical eligibility criteria. SSA field offices also issue Social Security numbers and update those cards when individuals change their name or status. Beneficiaries rely on field office staff to answer questions about SSA benefits, how to apply, and the status of their cases – helping individuals to navigate their application and access the benefits, if eligible.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, SSA closed its field offices to the public, except in very limited “dire need” circumstances, and shifted its employees to maximum telework. SSA serves many people who are at high risk of death or severe health effects due to COVID-19, including seniors and people with severe medical conditions. SSA must also keep its employees safe. I supported these SSA actions to safeguard the public and agency employees.

At the same time, I continue to be gravely concerned about the loss of local, in-person service and its impact on the public's ability to obtain assistance from SSA during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have received many reports of individuals who have been unable to navigate SSA's online or telephone services, or who need services that SSA can only provide in person. The Washington Post recently highlighted the tragic human cost when vulnerable individuals have been unable to access SSA services due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ During the unprecedented crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic seniors, people with disabilities, and survivors must be able to count on the Social Security benefits that they have earned, along with the ability to obtain service from SSA to secure those benefits.

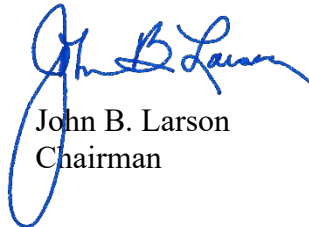
In recent months, SSA has been able to gradually increase the availability of in-person appointments at field offices while also ensuring safety for the public and agency employees. I understand that you are now working to implement a Reentry Plan that will allow for even greater access to in-person SSA services.

I therefore write to request that you share information regarding:

1. How and when SSA will improve customer service, including increasing in-person services, and
2. SSA's reentry plans, including the provisions that you are putting in place to safeguard the health of the public and agency employees, while also ensuring that the American people can access their Social Security benefits and SSA services.

In the future when the agency is able to provide a safe environment for the public and agency employees, SSA must ensure that access to local field offices is restored. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that in many cases – and particularly for low-income seniors and people with disabilities – there is often no substitute for individualized, in-person assistance. SSA field offices should not be eliminated, hours should not be limited, and assistance must continue to be available both to those with appointments and those who walk in seeking immediate help.

Sincerely,



John B. Larson
Chairman

¹ The Washington Post, Dec. 18, 2021. *Social Security offices have been closed for most of the pandemic. That effort to protect public health has wounded some of the neediest Americans.*

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/social-security-coronavirus/2021/12/18/0e3b9508-4bc1-11ec-b73b-a00d6e559a6e_story.html