



November 3, 2022

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives

Subject: Funding for the Social Security Administration

Dear Leaders Schumer and McConnell, Speaker Pelosi, and Leader McCarthy:

The undersigned organizations of the Consortium For Constituents with Disabilities' (CCD) Social Security Task Force urge you to take immediate action to assure that the Social Security Administration (SSA) has the resources it needs to restore staffing after two years of record-high attrition among frontline staff. Just as urgent is the need to address SSA's outdated phone systems that generate busy signals much of the time; keep people on hold for hours when they do manage to get through; and regularly drop calls mid-conversation when they finally are able to speak to SSA representatives. While the anomaly funding for first quarter of FY 2023 was necessary to prevent a service crisis in the short term, it is not even enough to meet SSA's fixed cost increases this year, let alone to replace staff losses and improve service. SSA urgently needs full funding of the President's budget request for the Agency in FY 2023, in order to meet its mission of providing income security for all Americans.

CCD is the largest coalition of national organizations working together to advocate for federal public policy that ensures the self-determination, independence, empowerment, integration and inclusion of children and adults with disabilities in all aspects of society. The CCD Social Security Task Force focuses on disability policy issues in the Title II disability programs and the Title XVI Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program. The SSI and Title II cash benefits, along with the related Medicaid and Medicare benefits, are the means of survival for millions of individuals with disabilities. They rely on SSA to promptly and fairly adjudicate their applications for disability benefits and to handle many other actions critical to their well-being.

When Congress passed the Omnibus Appropriations Act of 2022, it allocated \$1 billion less than SSA's funding request, to an amount far lower than proposed by both the House and Senate Appropriations Committees. This funding amount is insufficient to meet SSA's fixed costs, let alone address the crisis that the agency is currently facing. From 2010 to 2022, SSA's operating budget declined by 17% after inflation, while the number of beneficiaries rose by 21%, primarily as a result of the growth in new retirement beneficiaries. This has also led to staffing shortages, with the agency losing over 7,000 full-time equivalents between 2010 and 2020 and an additional 1,400 since the beginning of the pandemic. On top of that, the agency expects to lose nearly 6,000 SSA and disability determination service employees in 2023. Less money and fewer staff to serve more beneficiaries challenges SSA's ability to provide good

customer service, while continuing to deal with massive phone issues. These are many of the reasons why CCD urged Congress to fully fund the agency's budget request—they are already underfunded, but face particular issues this year that mean that the FY22 funding was crucial.

SSA staff undertook herculean efforts early in the pandemic to shift work online and to the phone lines, including publishing more widely the direct lines to the field offices to address the level of need. We understand that call volume tripled and continued to grow throughout the pandemic. And there is no question that SSA has been ill-equipped to deal with this new demand: the SSA Office of Inspector General found in FY 2020, 4.6% of all calls received a busy signal and only 51% of calls were actually handled. This aligns with the anecdotal reports that our organizations have received since the beginning of the pandemic of individuals waiting for hours on hold. But these reports have grown even more dire since late February. We have been told of beneficiaries and their assistors receiving a busy signal from every field office in a state and calling repeatedly over the course of a day or a week and being unable to get through. We have reported this issue to SSA and did not receive a clear explanation for why the phone service has gotten particularly worse recently, although we were told that it is unlikely these phone issues will be resolved until the fall given the agency's current resources. The fact that these new and more serious issues are coming just as field offices reopen is extremely concerning to us and funneling calls away from field offices to the national 800 number is unlikely to result in improved customer service.

While the additional funding for SSA in the recent continuing resolution provides the agency with \$400 million, annualized, it does not keep up with fixed-cost increases, staffing losses, or increased workloads. In 2023, the agency must absorb more than half a billion dollars in fixed-cost increases alone, such as employee pay raises, rising benefits costs, and increases in rent and postage — which are rising higher than usual because of inflation. In order to begin to restore customer service, SSA also must replace the thousands of frontline staff who departed the agency during the pandemic. We urge Congress to act as quickly as possible to fund SSA to the full amount requested in FY23 budget. The people with disabilities and older adults who rely on monthly checks deserve quality customer service, as do the millions of others who need some service from SSA. SSA does not have the resources to ensure the level of customer service that the public expects and deserves. Congress needs to take steps now to give them those resources.

Sincerely,

American Academy of Pediatrics
American Association on Health and Disability
American Council of the Blind
American Network of Community Options and Resources
The Arc of the United States
Autism Society of America
Autistic Self Advocacy Network
Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation
Community Legal Services of Philadelphia
Cure SMA
Epilepsy Foundation
Family Voices
Justice in Aging
Lakeshore Foundation
National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys
National Alliance on Mental Illness

National Association of Disability Representatives
National Committee to Preserve Social Security & Medicare
National Disability Institute
National Disability Rights Network (NDRN)
National Down Syndrome Congress
National Organization of Social Security Claimants' Representatives (NOSSCR)
National PLAN Alliance
Pandemic Patients
Paralyzed Veterans of America
Special Needs Alliance
United Spinal Association
VisionServe Alliance

CC: Members of House of Representatives and Senate