

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

January 13, 2020

Mr. Andrew Saul
Commissioner
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21235

Dear Commissioner Saul:

We are writing to express our concern about the loss of Social Security Administration (SSA) staff at the three Vermont field offices. Since 2010, Vermont has lost almost a quarter of its Social Security field office staff because of national cuts to SSA's operating budget. This has been the highest rate of Social Security field staff losses in all of New England and has resulted in longer wait times for claims, appeals, and even routine inquiries. It is critically important that SSA continue to strengthen local offices so that our constituents can receive the benefits they qualify for and rely on.

Social Security is one of the most successful government programs in our nation's history. More than 60 million Americans and their families receive benefits, but drastic cuts to the administration of the program are forcing fewer workers to do more work with fewer resources. The results can be deadly. The Washington Post reported that 10,000 people died while waiting for a decision on their disability claim in Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 alone.¹ We need to better serve the millions of Americans who have paid into the Social Security system their entire lives.

We were pleased to see that SSA announced the hiring of more than 1,100 new workers for the National 800 Number and processing centers, but SSA's stated focus on supporting front line customer service should also result in additional hires for field offices. SSA loses about 4,000 employees each year to retirement or other opportunities, and a hiring freeze is preventing the replacement of these important workers. Having access to local field offices is important to the people of Vermont. Many Vermonters feel that the help they receive at the National 800 Number is limited and sometimes inaccurate. Often, Social Security cases require input and action from the local field office or processing centers. Without the necessary staff resources in place, these cases can be delayed and cause significant hardship to Vermonters.

While we are glad to see staff being hired for the processing centers, it has come to our attention that the processing times in particular at the Baltimore Processing Center, Office of Disability Operations (PC7) and the Office of International Operations (PC8), are significantly delayed. It is not uncommon to wait several weeks for PC7 to complete needed payment action on a dire need case. In the past, dire need cases were processed in 2 to 3 days. Routine case inquiries at PC7 take a month, sometimes more, to be completed, while in the past, these were completed within 7 to 14 days. These processing centers do vital work connected to our constituents'

¹ Washington Post. Nov. 20, 2017. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/local/2017/11/20/10000-people-died-waiting-for-a-disability-decision-in-the-past-year-will-he-be-next/?utm_term=.378342871fa

Social Security benefits, but these delays are critical, especially in dire need cases where Vermonters are facing foreclosure, eviction, or utility shutoffs.

After boosting Social Security administrative funding by \$480 million for FY18, SSA committed to hire five additional field office staffers in Vermont. This increase in staffing would have replaced almost a third of the personnel loss that Vermont field offices have faced since 2010. However, despite the promise of additional hires, staffing in Vermont field offices continues to decline. The Burlington office lost 3 employees in FY19, going from 24 staffers to only 21. The Rutland Office is down from 18 staffers in FY15 to 16 today. The Montpelier office has suffered the most losses over the past five years, going from 17 staffers to 11, a loss of more than a third of its staff. Consequently, Vermonters and our congressional offices have experienced a noticeable decline in the quality of services provided by the three field offices in Vermont.

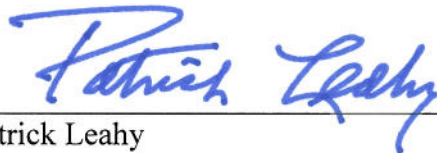
The reduction in staffing in Vermont field offices runs contrary to the recent funding increase and the commitments made by SSA to invest in customer service and benefit delivery. We are writing to request the agency's response to the specific factors that led to the staffing shortage in Vermont, and what steps SSA will be taking to ensure that Vermont field offices are fully staffed. Additionally, we are writing to request the specific number of new hires at PC7, PC8, and the Northeastern Program Service Center (PC1), as these centers provide essential support to Vermont beneficiaries. Vermont has the second oldest population in the country and is experiencing a rapid increase in its senior population.

Social Security provides a critical support for Vermont's seniors and people living with disabilities, especially those who are financially vulnerable. Social Security field offices provide important services to Vermonters and we will continue to work to ensure they have the resources needed. We look forward to working together to improve service to people in Vermont and across the country, and appreciate your prompt response to this letter.

Sincerely,



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



Patrick Leahy
United States Senator



Peter Welch
United States Congressman