

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

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Ranking Member Kweisi Mfume
Subcommittee on Government Operations and the Federal Workforce
Hearing on “Please Leave Your Message at the Tone: Addressing Post-Pandemic Backlogs and Delays at Federal Agencies”
June 21, 2023

Thank you, Chair Sessions.

Americans deserve nothing short of top tier, customer-focused, accessible, and efficient services from their government. Today, we convene to discuss a topic that impacts veterans, grandparents, and all those who rely on our federal agencies as a lifeline. We owe it to our constituents to keep our commitment to improving the government’s work for the people.

When discussing agency backlogs, it is important to take note of the timeline leading up to our current crisis. **In 2017, the previous Administration implemented a nearly 3-month government-wide hiring freeze.** Some agencies maintained their hiring freeze for substantially longer, such as the State Department, where the freeze lasted 16 months. This freeze constricted the job market and destroyed employee welfare and morale.

Since then, we’ve been playing a game of “catch up.” Most agencies have struggled to hire enough staff, even in the midst of record low unemployment.

The American Federation of Government Employees reports that in fiscal year 2022, the Social Security Administration’s workforce was the smallest it’s been in 25 years, yet the number of people on Social Security—people who rely on these benefits to pay for food and medicine—has increased by more than 10 million in the past decade. This increase in beneficiaries and lack of staff has extended wait times.

For example, in Maryland, processing times for disability claims increased by roughly 105% from 2019 to 2022, extending the average processing time from 106 days to 218 days.

These issues of low staffing and long processing times are shared across almost all customer service-focused federal agencies.

Passport demand is still at a record high, putting significant stress on the Agency. Last month, Secretary Blinken testified before the House Appropriations Committee, noting that the State Department is “getting 500,000 applications a week for a passport,” noting that it is, “30 to 40% above last year.”

These are truly alarming statistics. Demand is skyrocketing, yet staffing and resources remain relatively static. And the most vulnerable communities are disproportionately affected by these issues.

For many veterans, a stifling backlog at the National Archives and Records Administration's National Personnel Records Center could be the difference between receiving military benefits or none at all. It could be the difference between receiving assistance at a homeless shelter or living on the street.

And what really pulls at my heart strings are the countless constituent stories that my District team relays to me during our weekly staff meetings.

One constituent case I'd like to bring to your attention is Andrew's story.

Andrew has Multiple Sclerosis and contacted our office in February 2022. He filed his disability claim in 2019 and received a favorable decision in March 2021. Still, the Social Security Administration would not release his benefits. My District staff were able to work with the Agency and finally secure Andrew the benefits he desperately needed, but the process extended nearly a year after he received a favorable decision from the Agency. In the end, the Social Security Administration provided him with the \$86,529.00 in retroactive benefits he was owed.

I ask for unanimous consent to submit this CBS News article to the record, which further details how my office successfully intervened in this particular case with the Social Security Administration.

My District has closed 544 Social Security Administration cases and 683 passport cases since July of 2020. **This demonstrates the incredible need our constituents have for agency services and the diligence of federal employees.**

I am so appreciative of Ms. Lauren Hughes, who serves as a Public Affairs Specialist, and is a phenomenal asset to the Social Security Administration and congressional offices in our region. Since 2020, my District team has worked closely with Ms. Hughes to resolve complex constituent concerns. We are lucky to have Ms. Hughes on our side.

Unfortunately, not every beneficiary gets a "Ms. Hughes," or a determined, District office staffer from Maryland's 7th Congressional District, to assist with their casework.

Instead, many are left to wait through the backlog, with no advocate by their side. **While my office stands ready to help, I believe we have a duty to our constituents to remedy this customer service issue at the agency level.**

That is why Democrats and Republicans set aside party differences and passed the Modernizing Government Technology Act of 2017 to authorize the Technology Modernization Fund (TMF). Democrats secured nearly \$1 billion to invest in this Fund, in attempt to help reduce consumer wait times, eliminate duplicative paperwork, and decrease red tape.

Additionally, I, alongside Representatives Katie Porter and Gerry Connolly, introduced the Streamlining IRS Operations Act and the Trust in Government Act to encourage federal agencies to improve the services they provide to everyday American citizens through streamlined Social Security Administration processes, simplified electronic tax filings, and a more efficient passport renewal system.

Thank you to our witnesses, Assistant Secretary Rena Bitter, Deputy Commissioner Chad Poist, and Director Scott Levins for testifying before us today and for their commitment to a more efficient government.

There is certainly more work that can be done, and I believe that much of that work will take place within this very Subcommittee.

I'm looking forward to hearing the facts and strategizing further action needed at the congressional level.

Thank you, Chair Sessions. I yield back.

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