



Leadership Council of Aging Organizations

Debra B. Whitman, Chair

November 17th, 2014

The Honorable Carolyn Colvin
Acting Commissioner, Social Security Administration
6401 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21235-6401

Dear Acting Commissioner Colvin:

On behalf of the Leadership Council of Aging Organizations (LCAO), a coalition of national not-for-profit organizations representing over 60 million older Americans, we write to express our appreciation for the Social Security Administration's (SSA) efforts to develop Vision 2025, a strategic plan for the operation of SSA for the coming decade. We are pleased that such a process is underway and offer any assistance we can provide as your work on this important plan moves forward.

We know you share with us the goal of maintaining and increasing public support for Social Security by ensuring that SSA's tradition of effective administration continues under your leadership. From the very beginning, an emphasis on first-class customer service has been a hallmark of SSA. However, budget cuts have taken their toll. Field offices have been closed and staff reduced, with the consequences that backlogs are longer than ever and service compromised.

This puts SSA's excellent reputation for public service in jeopardy. We believe it important to express our concern about overly aggressive efforts to substitute online services for those of trained employees working in field offices around the country. Too much emphasis on transferring responsibility from well-trained, knowledgeable claims representatives to online services offering boiler plate information and largely unevaluated results is a mistake that could be costing often vulnerable individuals thousands of dollars.

We encourage you to give the needs of vulnerable individuals special prominence in your strategic plan, and suggest you devote one of the identified themes of the plan to this topic. Due to the nature of SSA's mission, you will always be interacting with members of the public who have special needs that need to be accommodated – those with physical limitations, those with cognitive impairments or mental illness, those who are isolated and unable to access technology due to low income, low literacy levels, or other factors. In addition, the growing diversity of the American population means that the need to communicate effectively with limited English proficient individuals in a wide variety of languages will increase.

We understand that SSA has looked at some survey data in your efforts to gain some insight into what kind of services and types of interaction with SSA members of the public will want and need in ten years and beyond. However, we believe that more investigation needs to be done into parsing out what the true demands of various segments of the population will be before the planning is finalized and then implemented around the choices for service delivery that SSA will be offering in the future. While we are interested in seeing the survey results you have already considered, we encourage you to engage in more extensive studies into what members of the public will expect and demand of SSA.

As the strategic planning process continues, we the undersigned national organizations representing the elderly, urge you to keep these points in mind:

- Resources need to be directed toward maintaining a vibrant, strong and widely accessible field office presence across the country, continuing SSA's legacy as a community-based agency, able to meet the needs of the American people where they live.
- We believe that the appropriate use of technology and online services can play a significant role in easing some of the current burden on field offices, but it should not be seen as a substitute for face to face, personal service.
- Vision 2025 needs to be built on a foundation of improving fairness and access at SSA for vulnerable populations, not solely around a focus on improving efficiency and maximizing choices for those with the most advantages.
- We encourage you to do more extensive surveys and investigation into what members of the public will need and want from their interactions with SSA in the future, so that your long-term planning is based on those true demands.

We stand ready to work with you to develop and implement a strategic plan that maintains SSA's historic commitment to the highest quality service expected and paid for by the American people. We thank you for your willingness to engage with all stakeholders in developing Vision 2025, and ask that you maintain an open and transparent process in which you freely share the information you rely upon in the development of this plan.

Sincerely,

AFSCME Retirees
Alliance for Retired Americans
American Society on Aging (ASA)
American Federation of Government Employee (AFGE)
American Postal Workers Retirees (APWU)
B'nai B'rith International
Caring Across Generations

Center for Medicare Advocacy
Gray Panthers
International Association for Indigenous Aging (IA²)
International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace & Agricultural Implement Workers of
America (UAW)
LeadingAge
Medicare Rights Center
National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association (NARFE)
National Adult Day Services Association (NADSA)
National Adult Protective Services Association (NASPSA)
National Alliance for Caregiving
National Asian Pacific Center on Aging (NAPCA)
National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs (NANASP)
National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers (NAPGCM)
National Association of Social Workers (NASW)
National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare (NCPSSM)
The National Hispanic Council on Aging (NHCOA)
National Senior Citizens Law Center (NSCLC)
OWL – The Voice of Women 40+
Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC)
Pension Rights Center
Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW)
Women's Institute for a Secure Retirement (WISER)