

**Opening Statement  
Senator Susan M. Collins  
Special Committee on Aging**

**“Reduction in Face-to-Face Services at the  
Social Security Administration”**

**June 18, 2014**

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**Chairman Nelson, thank you for calling  
today’s hearing on a topic of great concern to  
all of us – the impact on elderly and disabled  
beneficiaries of the Social Security  
Administration’s reduction of person-to-person  
services, including closing field offices or  
restricting hours of operations.**

**Despite an increased caseload resulting  
from the retirement of the Baby Boomers and**

**the expansion of the SSDI population, in the past five years the Social Security Administration (SSA) has closed 64 of approximately twelve-hundred and forty-five field offices -- the largest field office reduction in its history -- and shuttered five-hundred and thirty-three temporary mobile offices. It has also reduced field office hours, and began closing field offices at noon on Wednesdays in 2013.**

**Nearly one in four Maine residents – about 315 thousand people -- receives retirement, survivor, or disability benefits through the Social Security Administration. These citizens**

are now served by eight field offices located throughout the state, where trained staff help them get important documents and sort through the complexities of the Social Security and Medicare programs so they can apply for and get the benefits which they have earned.

Until recently, there were nine field offices in Maine. In 2011, however, the Social Security Administration closed the Rumford office, replacing it with a two-way video monitor located at the town library, connected to the nearest remaining Social Security field office, about 50 miles away, in Auburn.

**The Social Security Administration has been pushing for years to reduce the face-to-face services it provides through its field offices and to force beneficiaries to interact with the agency online or over the phone.**

**While I don't object to providing services this way where it's appropriate, I am concerned that the SSA has not sought public input, and it is not taking into account the impact on the beneficiaries they are supposed to be serving.**

**I was particularly troubled to learn of a draft strategic plan prepared for the SSA by the National Academy of Public Administrators called "Vision 2025." This plan, which will not**

**be published until this fall, proposes that the SSA shift from face-to-face services to online systems as the primary means of serving beneficiaries over the next 11 years.**

**This is completely unrealistic. The fact of the matter is, millions of seniors and disabled Americans are not accustomed to doing business online, and particularly in rural areas, many do not have access to computers or high-speed Internet.**

**Even as computer and broadband technologies become more widespread, the idea that the Social Security Administration**

**can serve beneficiaries primarily online ignores the very real needs of the senior and disabled populations. That is why I asked Tammy DeLong to testify before us today. Tammy serves as the Medicare Specialist for the Aroostook Area Agency on Aging, located in Presque Isle, Maine, where she works closely with the local SSA field office. Tammy estimates that she handled 14 hundred senior citizen clients last year alone. She knows our seniors and disabled citizens from first-hand experience, and can explain why the loss of face-to-face services will be a real hardship for them.**

**I am also concerned by the lack of transparency in the Social Security Administration's process for closing field offices or reducing their hours. The 2014 Appropriations Omnibus directed the SSA to report its policies and procedures for closing and consolidating field offices, and the SSA submitted a report last month listing six major factors it claims to examine in making its decisions. I am troubled by the fact that, in reviewing information about recent field office closures, our Committee staff was unable to confirm that the SSA had followed the procedures it claims to have in place. Moreover, the SSA does not appear to seek out**

**or allow public input until after a decision to close an office has been made – essentially presenting the local community with a “fait accompli.” This must change.**

**Again, Chairman Nelson, thank you for calling this important hearing. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.**