

Opening Statement of Chairman Bill Nelson
Senate Special Committee on Aging: Reduction in Face-to-Face Services at the Social Security Administration
June 18, 2014

Good afternoon everyone, and thank you for being here today. This Committee has held several hearings highlighting the importance of Social Security and laying out the sobering statistics about how many seniors rely heavily on these benefits in retirement. About a quarter of married couples and about half of single people depend on Social Security for at least 90 percent of their retirement income.

Given the important role Social Security plays in the lives of our seniors, we are holding this hearing today to ensure that all the services supporting this program continue to serve this diverse population.

For most Social Security beneficiaries, the field office is still the source not just for clearing up any issues with their monthly payments, or filing for benefits in the first place, but for a whole range of services that help them verify their identity or obtain critical social services.

Like so many federal agencies, Congress has in recent years asked the Social Security Administration to do more with less. At a time when the younger part of the Baby Boom Generation is reaching its most disability prone years and the older part is hitting retirement age, the agency received a total of nearly three billion dollars less than the president requested over a three-year period.

They've lost 11,000 workers, and I am going to enter into the record a statement from the American Federation of Governmental Employees that talks about how its workers have been impacted and their concerns moving forward.

So it was no wonder that SSA decided to look for other ways to cut back. They reduced the amount of time offices are open to the public - the equivalent of a full day every week. They stopped mailing benefit statements to educate the public about their earned benefits. They introduced plans to stop providing other key services that help low-income Americans to get public supports like housing subsidies or heating assistance.

Some have questioned whether this is death by a thousand cuts, that an agency known for its great service could be undercutting its mission.

Most of this has been done with very little consultation of Congress or impacted communities. You see this most clearly with field office closures. Over the last five years, SSA has shut down more field offices than at any other five-year period in the agency's history.

So this Committee undertook a bipartisan investigation into the basis for these closures. We hoped to learn more about Social Security's process and how it decides which field offices to close and which ones serve a vital role in their communities. We asked for all the documents explaining each of the 63 closures since 2010, but all SSA was able to provide us were the documents for offices closed in the last year and a half. Nonetheless, the pattern that emerges from the 25 office closure reviews is alarming. I am entering the results of that investigation into the record today.

Here's what we learned: The Social Security Administration is not talking to the people on the ground in these communities, including field office managers, employees and other stakeholders, until after it makes a decision. They don't do any kind of analysis on what would happen to a community when their field office closes, including figuring out how the most vulnerable populations would make their way to the

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next closest office. Certain pieces of information are not on record anywhere in their documents. SSA didn't note in some communities that public transportation from the closed area to the new site was virtually nonexistent.

At a time when the agency is pushing more people online to conduct their business, they don't even examine whether people in the vacated communities use the Internet in high numbers. In sum, it's a process that lacks rigor, transparency and frankly sufficient information to make a real decision.

We will hear from SSA today, and it is my sincere hope that we leave here with a plan to actually ensure that our most vulnerable populations are not left high and dry. That is certainly the feeling that still exists today in Gadsden County, Florida, where Social Security picked up shop with little notice and even less thought about how to serve this poor and rural community moving forward. We will hear the tale in full from one of their dedicated public servants, Commissioner Brenda Holt.

With that, I will turn it over to my partner, Senator Collins.