

Brenda Holt – Official Testimony – U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging

Chairman Nelson, Ranking Member Collins, and other members of the Committee:

My name is Brenda Holt, and I am a Gadsden County Commissioner in the panhandle of Florida. I am here today to talk about the closure of a field office in my county and a process that deeply frustrated and angered our rural community filled with low-income senior citizens. It's been three months since our field office has shut down. I am both upset about what happened and hopeful that maybe we can get service restored in the future.

Our community of about 60,000 people – and roughly 10,000 seniors – has been served by a Social Security field office in the county seat of Quincy, which is about 45 minutes away from Tallahassee. The office serves both my county of Gadsden County and neighboring Liberty County. Both counties have poverty numbers that are much higher than the state average; in fact, Gadsden County's poverty rate is nearly double the Florida average. We also trail the state averages in education; only about one in seven of our residents has a college degree. Most of the people here don't have computers, let alone reliable Internet access. Our county is very spread out, so even though we had a field office in Quincy, a lot of our residents live who live on the outskirts of the County struggle just to make it to the office, often getting a ride into town.

The Quincy office was scheduled to be shut down at the end of March. I understand Social Security may have informed a very small number of local officials last fall or winter. But the county most affected by this closure – Gadsden County – first learned of SSA's plans on March 5th. That did not give us a lot of time to try to stop this shutdown from happening, and I sensed that was the point.

I reached out to our senators and multiple members of Congress. I scheduled and held a forum at the Gadsden County Senior Center on March 18th. I invited all interested people in the community that I was able to reach. The county commission chairman Eric Hinson, State Representative Alan Williams, Gadsden County Sheriff Morris Young's representative and many others came to help. Most of our seniors did not know about the planned closure. They were very worried. It is highly unlikely that many of these seniors will be able to get to Tallahassee or Marianna, the two closest offices. We have one shuttle, the Gadsden Express, which runs to Tallahassee once in the morning and returns to Quincy once at night. But that shuttle is overflowing with people who live in Quincy and work in Tallahassee. In the month of April, approximately 2204 residents of Gadsden County used this shuttle. Most of the time, people are standing or sitting on the floor. Seniors without their own transportation, who are able to get to Quincy to ride the shuttle, are stuck in Tallahassee all day. Several of these seniors need assistance walking or have walking equipment without adequate room on the overcrowded bus. Even for those with cars, Tallahassee is a much larger city than Quincy, and having to navigate traffic to get across the city – because the office is on the east side and we are west of the city – is very tricky for older people. Later that afternoon State Representative Alan Williams scheduled a meeting with, myself, Gadsden County Sheriff Morris Young, Gadsden County Commission chairman Eric Hinson, local NAACP and SSA regional director, and staff

members at Florida's capital and presented our case. During this meeting, Sheriff Young called Mr. Robinson, an elderly man, and allowed the representative to speak to Mr. Robinson on speaker phone to explain the situation of the office closure in Quincy and services in Tallahassee. Mr. Robinson's stated on the phone, "I don't know what he is saying, can you tell me what he is saying". How appropriate was Mr. Robinson's statement? It could not have been planned better. It clearly showed everyone listening in on the phone call, that he did not understand what was being told to him. This was a perfect example of why senior citizens and the disabled need personal face to face contact. After the phone call with Mr. Robinson and further discussion, still, we were given the nicest "no" I have ever heard!

In my experience, elderly people, particularly those in my community may feel dishonored if they feel their basic rights have been taken away. Especially since they have worked hard to earn their Social Security Benefits. I can use the example of Mr. Kate Alexander, a gentleman whose cancer case is an example of how the elderly community in Gadsden County are treated. He had paid for his own insurance from the time he was 16 years old until he was 60. Mr. Alexander was told he could not get chemotherapy because of his deductible, and his insurance would not cover the costs. He had to travel 54 miles to Tallahassee, FL from his home in Gadsden County, embarrassed and ashamed. Eventually, Mr. Alexander was able to receive treatment for his cancer after being signed up for Affordable Healthcare. Unfortunately, due to the timing of the issue, Mr. Alexander passed away from lack of chemotherapy treatments while waiting on insurance to cover costs. When you tell the elderly 'No', it sends the message that they are not worthy of your time or energy. It is embarrassing for them and they think you are dishonoring them. Mr. Alexander commented, "They just don't want us." Well, that's why seniors and the truly disabled have people like us (community leaders) to fight for them in Gadsden County Florida.

So county leaders, including my fellow County Commissioners, Representative Alan Williams, Gadsden County Sheriff Morris Young and other community partners discussed how the county could help Social Security stay in Gadsden County. And with the help of our elected officials, we got a conference call with SSA Commissioner Carolyn Colvin and other agency officials on March 25th, just a few days before the office was to be shut down. They told us they would be saving \$3.2 million over 10 years if they closed the office. We told them that the amount they were paying for rent – about \$15,000 a month – was way too high for our area. After talking to the landlord we offered them a deal: reduced rent at the same facility. They weren't interested. Then we offered them a free facility, about 4,000 square feet of office space, an annex building of our sheriff's office, or free space at the local hospital. The sheriff's office offered to provide a guard at no cost to the agency. And the city of Quincy said it would cut their utilities bill by 25 percent. All told, this would have cut SSA's costs more than half. But they refused to even negotiate or come to the table. I asked the Commissioner and members on the conference call to please train us to help our citizens so that we may have the opportunity to make the transition smoother. The closing of the office is an insult to the members of our community and those who have offered their resources to keep the office open.

A couple days later, a few officials from the SSA regional office in Atlanta came to Quincy to explore options for some continued service in the area. Even they conceded that the free building we offered was in good shape. But all they were willing to do, and only after we pressured them, was put in a video unit that seniors could use to talk to an SSA employee in another city and computer icons on the other computers at the three libraries. They told us this unit had been sitting in the back of the Quincy office unused. It would have been nice to have had that out working in the office somewhere so that actual SSA employees could teach our residents how to use it after they left, but at this point, there was no time for that. I was the first one to use it on the 27th, just a couple days before the Quincy office shut down for good.

After a couple weeks of no in-person services in Quincy, the video unit was up and running in our library which is a couple of miles from the field office. The other libraries had icons installed as well. This video unit works pretty well, and I appreciate having something for our seniors to use. There's only one unit, though, so if you get there and a few people have arrived before you, you could be waiting a while. And the library staff there doesn't know the lingo or the forms, so they can only do so much. SSA gave us a fax machine for documents, but it is in a separate room from the computer. The library environment was not designed with confidentiality in mind, meaning that faxes containing personal information could easily be intercepted and compromised leading to possible identity theft. Many residents are unaware that all of their needs cannot be met using the video unit at the library in Quincy. This creates a problem where people are wasting time visiting the Quincy Library. They feel as if they have been misled in terms of what the Social Security Administration is offering them in lieu of the office closure.

It is a fine resource, but it is no replacement for a field office, with staffers who can walk our residents through a host of issues they may be having. We have a lot of special needs citizens here, so that unit won't work for everyone. We have people who can barely read because of vision problems. Or people with hearing problems, or poor comprehension problems. The computer is not the answer for many of these people. In fact, many of these people do not have phones. Many of these people have worked hard their whole lives, but are still financially restricted. These issues are not going away any time soon. We still have a direct need.

This whole process has been very sad to watch. We never had an opportunity to weigh in as a community to try to save our office. SSA did not do much of anything to inform our community of the closure. In fact, sometimes I still stop when I see people trying to get into the closed SSA building in Quincy to tell people that it is permanently closed. Our county is paying for advertisements in the newspaper to alert people who still don't know about this almost three months later. But this should not be our responsibility. It's unfortunate that their lives were disrupted by cutting this service. People are scrambling to figure out how to get the basic services they need.

Gadsden County conducted a survey to get insight into how the community as a whole felt about the video conferencing service that was offered. Out of the total number of people surveyed, 31% said they did not feel comfortable using the video service at the library, and would not recommend the service to their family and friends. Some of those concerns include:

- Adequate space at the library. There have been 212 visitors as of June 11, 2014. As the number of users grow, is the facility large enough to accommodate them all?
- The quality of service. The quality of services are expected to decline since citizens can no longer rely on hands-on or face to face services.
- The library environment was not designed with confidentiality in mind, meaning that faxes containing personal information could easily be intercepted and compromised leading possible identity theft.
- Partial services the video computer is only at 1 of the 3 libraries, the other 2 libraries only have SSA icons at those computer locations. Therefore for those that need the assistance of SSA staff there is not a video computer and they have wasted the time and may still have to drive 30 miles.

I am here today to see if anything can be done to restore the field office to our community. But if that cannot be accomplished, then I want to make sure that other communities like ours at least get a fighting chance. And I want to make sure Social Security remembers that even if it no longer has a physical presence in our community, it still needs to find ways to serve us going forward. Our needs matter, and we won't just be cast aside. Our seniors have paid their dues, now it is time for this country to help them.