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United States Senate

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6400

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May 14, 2018

Ms. Nancy A. Berryhill
Deputy Commissioner of Operations
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21235

Ms. Emily W. Murphy
Administrator
U.S. General Services Administration
1800 F Street NW
Washington, DC 20405

Dear Deputy Commissioner Berryhill and Administrator Murphy,

Since the inception of Social Security in 1935, a key element in the administration of the program has been the network of local field offices where Americans go for help in understanding their rights and benefits under the program. We write to express our deep concern that the recently announced closures of multiple field offices continues a trend that will significantly affect the quality of service that the Social Security Administration (SSA) provides and to request a joint briefing from SSA and the General Services Administration (GSA) on the agencies' plans to continue to meet the needs of individuals and families.

It is our view that the availability of conveniently located and adequately staffed Social Security field offices is crucial to providing good service to America's seniors, people with disabilities, and their families, and to maintaining the public's trust in Social Security, Medicare, and other programs that SSA administers. Within these local offices are helpful and knowledgeable staff who are available to assist the public in filing claims for benefits. Whether it's time to file a claim or whether something has gone wrong regarding a person's Social Security benefits, the availability of a convenient network of nearby offices is an essential element in SSA's system of delivering services to the American people.

Alongside SSA, GSA plays the important role of SSA's real estate agent, assisting the agency in locating and leasing office space in which to house its local field offices. Finding real estate that meets SSA's needs while also being conveniently located along major transit arteries is a difficult and demanding task in and of itself.

Unfortunately, since 2000, SSA has embarked on a program that has led to the closure of nearly 125 field offices, or roughly one in ten field offices nationwide. Service hours at field

office locations have also been cut while wait times have risen and hearing backlogs have grown. Most recently, SSA has targeted offices in Chicago, Milwaukee, Baltimore, and Arlington, VA for closure or consolidation. Closing offices such as these causes extreme difficulty for seniors and individuals with disabilities who often rely on public transportation and for whom traveling long distances can be difficult.

Particularly concerning are reports that in at least some of the locations where offices were closed, the reason cited for the closure was the inability of GSA to locate acceptable real estate within the geographical area served by the closed or consolidated offices. This is reportedly the case even in areas where there were significant vacancy rates in commercial real estate.

As some 10,000 seniors turn 65 each day and file for Social Security and Medicare, we should be expanding access to services, not reducing access. For that reason, we ask that both SSA and GSA brief the Senate Special Committee on Aging staff on the issues relevant to both agencies as they work together to ensure the continued presence of a strong and vibrant network of local Social Security field offices throughout our country. We would appreciate receiving this briefing by no later than June 15, 2018.

Sincerely,



Susan M. Collins
Chairman
U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging