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Congress of the United States
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Washington, DC 20515

COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

COMMITTEE ON SMALL BUSINESS

November 15, 2021

Dr. Kilolo Kijakazi
Acting Commissioner
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21235

Dear Dr. Kijakazi:

I write to express my support for the Social Security Administration's (SSA) "Phased Reentry Plan" announced November 5, 2021. In particular, I am encouraged by your agency's intention to begin reopening SSA offices in an effort to improve service for those struggling to access Social Security benefits. As you continue to finalize specific personnel and operational policies to balance the health and safety of your employees with your ability to provide quality services to all Americans, I urge you to prioritize the reopening of SSA field offices nationwide and increase capacity for in-person appointments.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent closure of SSA field offices in March 2020, I have heard from a concerning number of my constituents experiencing difficulties accessing their Social Security benefits, updating immigration and marital statuses, or applying for Social Security cards. Although SSA has established workarounds to handle many of these services over the phone or online, in-person operations are essential for my constituents, especially for those who may lack access to reliable internet or phone service.

For example, per SSA's guidance, my constituents have sent original documentation through the mail or through SSA drop boxes available at the field offices, including Pennsylvania State IDs, Passports, Permanent Resident Cards, or Certificates of Naturalization or Citizenship. Many of my constituents have shared their frustrations and anxieties about parting with such important original documents, particularly given recent delays in the postal service. By expanding in-person operations to allow for walk-in or on-site appointments, SSA can work directly with individuals to ensure the sensitive documentation is reviewed, processed, and returned safely and securely.

Promptly restoring in-person field operations will greatly improve the quality public services my constituents depend on. With minimal in-person staffing since the pandemic began, SSA's

leadership reported the average time to complete an action at its field offices increased by 20% in Fiscal Year 2020, significantly reducing productivity.¹ Furthermore, field offices are now handling three times as many calls compared to pre-pandemic levels, which has challenged staff workloads.² These challenges are especially evident for my community, where nearly 140,000 beneficiaries depend on their monthly Social Security payments.

Since this pandemic began, businesses, schools, as well as local, state, and federal government offices, have adapted to prioritize safety for employees to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The availability of COVID-19 vaccinations and testing, social distancing, face coverings, staggered work schedules, sanitation, and air purification have made it possible to safely expand in-person work operations, especially for communities like mine as one of the most vaccinated in the entire country. With these developments, as well as President Biden's Executive Order mandating all Federal employees to be vaccinated, I encourage SSA to accelerate the restoration of in-person field operations in my community so that my constituents can access the vital public services your agency provides.

I recognize the hard work SSA and its staff manage daily, which continues to be vital for my constituents during these challenging times. Thank you for your leadership and commitment to serving my community and keeping our Federal workforce and public safe.

Sincerely,



CHRISSY HOULAHAN
Member of Congress

cc: Grace M. Kim
Deputy Commissioner, Operations

¹ <https://www.ssa.gov/news/press/releases/2021/#4-2021-2>

² https://www.ssa.gov/legislation/testimony_042921.html