



A Path to Improve Customer Service at the Social Security Administration (SSA)

“We’re committed to providing efficient, responsive, and customer-focused service to all who rely on Social Security’s vital programs. While we face significant challenges, with adequate funding, we can fix our problems, but only if Congress lets us. I urge Congress to pass the President’s Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 President’s Budget and provide the funding we so desperately need.” – Commissioner Martin O’Malley

Since arriving at SSA, Commissioner O’Malley has taken swift action to make some immediate improvements to begin to improve employee and customer experience. One example of this was a simple technology fix to create a “no to all” button (similar to “select all”) within the claims-taking process on Supplemental Security Income (SSI) applications. By doing so, SSA has started to reduce time needed to collect information on applicants’ financial resources. Additionally, SSA rolled out a nationwide expansion of a new Automated Medicare Process (AMP) to improve processing for online Medicare claims. This change has reduced processing time for these claims from 7 minutes to 7 seconds, freeing up the equivalent of around 40 people to do other critical pending work.

The President’s request for 2025 funding, coupled with our current efforts, are improving service to Americans and Addressing Urgent Customer Service Needs.

On March 11, the President submitted his FY 2025 Budget to Congress. The Budget requests \$15.4 billion for Social Security, which is an 8-percent increase over FY 2024, to help us rebuild as we emerge from FY 2024.

The Budget positions Social Security to deliver accessible Social Security services to all eligible individuals, while maintaining rigorous stewardship and oversight of our programs. The President’s Budget will allow Social Security to significantly reduce customer wait times for people who use our National 800 Number to contact us, and to address the disability backlog, which is causing significant hardship for many people.

With the FY 2025 President’s Budget, Social Security can:

Issue Faster Disability Decisions: Social Security benefits provide important support to people facing difficult circumstances. The agency prioritizes cases with the most severe medical impairments—like certain cancers, brain disorders, and rare disorders affecting children—and state disability examiners issue decisions on those claims in roughly 25 days or less. Yet it still takes far too long for many people to get a decision on their disability benefit applications due to delays caused by a lack of resources to process their claims. Our Office of the Chief Actuary has made a general estimate that more than 30,000 people may have died in FY 2023 while their application for Social Security or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) disability benefits, or both, was pending a decision at the initial, reconsideration, or hearing levels. While this is a small percentage of the average number of people waiting for a decision, it remains imperative that we issue decisions faster at every level.

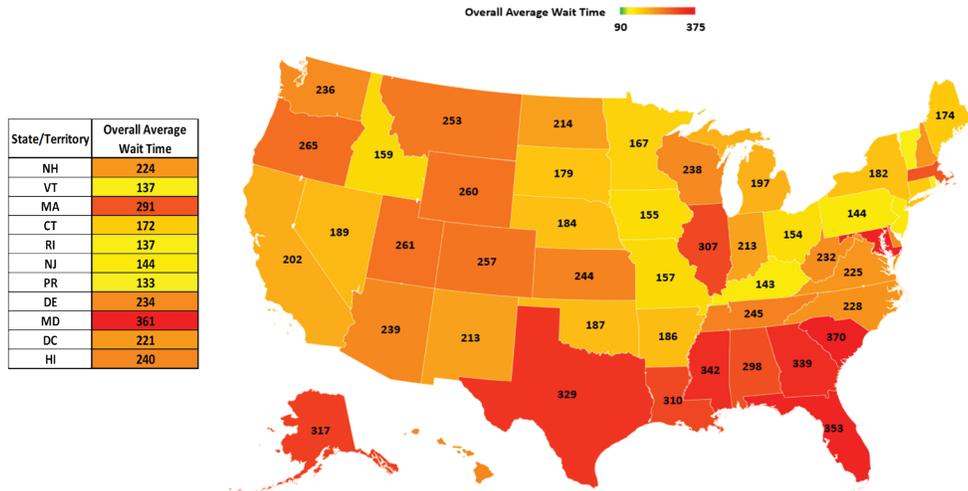
Commissioner O’Malley wants to speed up the decision-making process for both initial decisions and appeals. Thanks to recent efforts by our hearing office staff, SSA’s number of hearing decisions pending on disability appeals dropped below 300,000 in March 2024, marking a 30-year low.

With the President’s Budget, SSA will be able to process over 400,000 more claims than last year and begin reducing wait times.

Commissioner O’Malley is also taking important steps to implement compassionate, common-sense changes to the disability process. For example, beginning September 30, 2024, SSA will no longer include food in In-Kind Support and Maintenance (ISM) calculations. The new policy removes a critical barrier for SSI initial and continued eligibility due to an applicant’s or recipient’s receipt of informal food assistance from friends, family, and community networks of support.

It will take a multi-year effort to see significant improvements, but the Budget will put us on the right path.

Overall Average Wait Times By State for SSA Initial Disability Decisions



* Average wait times in days; updated as of Friday, May 31, 2024

** Map color gradation is based on SSA's historical overall average wait time of 120 days for initial disability claims

Data Source: Social Security Administration

Reduce Call Wait Times: Long wait times on SSA’s National 800 Number frustrates customers and is unacceptable. Commissioner O’Malley is taking steps to significantly reduce how long people have to wait to speak with a representative, including striving to reach a 12-minute average speed of answer on the National 800 Number by the end of FY 2025. This would be a significant improvement—average wait times on our National 800 Number doubled from 20 minutes in FY 2019 to about 40 minutes in the first quarter of FY 2024.

Improve our Overpayment and Underpayment Processes: SSA works to pay the right people the right amounts at the right time, and Social Security issues correct payments in most cases. However, there is room to improve, as people count on the agency to prevent overpayments from happening and make it easier to navigate the recovery and waiver processes when they occur. Commissioner O’Malley has already taken significant steps to improve this process and will continue examining ways to improve the improper payment processes.

Improvements are Underway, although it will Take Time.

Social Security has been chronically underfunded, and its staffing is continuing to decline, while the number of beneficiaries keeps growing. By the end of fiscal year FY 2024, SSA will serve roughly 74 million total beneficiaries, over 7 million more beneficiaries, with about 6,000 fewer full-time permanent staff when compared to FY 2015. While information technology modernization and other efficiencies have led to some improvements, there is no way around the fact that the agency cannot keep doing more with less.

SSA’s budget was essentially level from FY 2018 through FY 2021, while costs continued to increase. As a result, we ended FY 2022 with our lowest staffing level in 25 years. Actions SSA takes in FY 2024 and FY 2025 will help reverse course and put us on the path to restore service to the level our customers expect.

The President’s Budget provides a robust increase for customer service, acknowledging the fiscal limitations while also recognizing how critical these resources are for SSA.

“As the mayor of a cash-strapped city and then a recession-era governor, I’m quite familiar with operating on tight budgets. I have also worked quickly to implement commonsense reforms that are already improving customer service for the millions of Americans who seek benefits and assistance from Social Security every year. Even with all of that, SSA’s budget is far more dire than I thought. Years of underfunding have decimated our staffing levels and therefore also our ability to serve the public. Coming off a challenging budget year in FY 2024, it is critical that we receive adequate funding in FY 2025. The FY 2025 President’s Budget request of \$15.4 billion for SSA would allow us to invest in the customer service improvements we need to ensure Americans have efficient and timely access to the benefits they’ve earned.” – Commissioner Martin O’Malley



Securing today
and tomorrow

Social Security Administration
A Path to Improve Customer Service at the Social Security Administration (SSA)
May 2024
Produced and published at U.S. taxpayer expense