

>> If the federal government has a retail arm, it's the Social Security Administration. The venerable agency touches the lives of way more than just retirees. Congress has given it so many duties over the decades, many Americans aren't even aware of the benefits available to them. Doug Walker, the Deputy Commissioner of SSA, joined Tom Temin to discuss how Social Security communicates with citizens.

>> Well, overall, it's really about educating the public about Social Security programs and people's access to those programs. As you and your listeners may know, we have a wide range of programs, beginning with the retirement benefits that most people know about that were instituted at the beginning. Later on, we added survivors benefits for widows and children of the decedents. Then we added a disability program, got involved in Medicare, and finally in 1972 added the Supplemental Security Income. Now, all but SSI are programs that people pay into. They are earned benefits, and SSI is more of a needs-based program.

>> How do people find out about all of these things? Because, to tell you the truth, I don't even know about all of them.

>> Best way to find out about them is going to [SocialSecurity.gov](https://www.socialsecurity.gov) and specifically to set up a "my Social Security" account. We encourage everyone to do that and do that as soon as possible. If you are in the workforce and not receiving Social Security benefits, you can at least check to make sure that we have an accurate record of your earnings. And we use that earnings data to calculate your benefits along the line. And we literally ask you to check us. Set up a "my Social Security" account and check on those records. I found, when I signed up for a "my Social Security" account that for a couple years

when I was working for the Chicago Public Schools that I did not have Social Security earnings, and that's a hole in my gap -- that's a hole in my record. But I know that, and I only know that because I went and checked the account. For those who are beneficiaries, they can actually manage your account from "my Social Security," making adjustments to direct deposits, changing address. You can also, in several states now, including the District of Columbia, you can request a replacement Social Security card, and you can also get a 1099, a replacement 1099 form for filling out your taxes, all at "my Social Security."

>> What about print broadcasting, other ways of getting people aware of what is out there? Is that still part of the mix?

>> Sure. I mean, we have a long program of providing material for media outlets, and we are actually grateful to Federal News Radio for giving us this opportunity to talk about Social Security as an agency of the month. We actually do a lot of work with public service announcements, right? So we approach broadcasters and cable operators using public service announcements, because we do not spend a lot of money on outreach. We also have created, essentially, in the last couple years, our social media. So, we are primarily on Facebook and Twitter. We are trying to do some more with LinkedIn to try to recruit people. For instance, we are recruiting administrative law judges. And we created a blog, which is turning out to be a really well seen outlet for us, so we have 230,000 folks who subscribe to our blog, *Social Security Matters*.

>> Tell me more about what you're doing on Facebook and similar – well, I guess LinkedIn also, for that matter.

>> So, on Facebook and Twitter we've got information about the programs, but we also take in a lot and so, obviously we don't want people using their personal information on Facebook or on Twitter. You don't want to transmit that kind of data over the social media. But we are actually able to answer specific questions, particularly on Facebook. And we do different reminders about activities we have going. The baby names program that you see around Mother's Day it actually originates here, "my Social Security" week. We keep folks informed about the things that we are doing here, but we are actually able to answer specific questions about applying for benefits, making adjustments to programs, et cetera.

>> How many people are on that Facebook account in a given week?

>> So, we have – we wish these numbers were bigger, but we are just south of 150,000 followers on Facebook, 25,000 or so on Twitter. Our big hitter is the blog now.

>> And the blog is posted at SocialSecurity.gov?

>> You can go to SocialSecurity.gov. *Social Security Matters*, it's called.

>> We're speaking with Doug Walker, Deputy Commissioner of the Social Security Administration. When will you know you're successful? How do you measure whether what you're doing is working in terms of the millions of people that are eligible for the different earned benefits that Social Security has?

>> So we actually are able to measure a number of ways. Like I said, we always wish our numbers on social media were higher. Everyone wants higher numbers. But we are actually doing well. So, our website, for example, the 4CE Government Satisfaction

Index for now two or three years in a row we have had the top four government websites. So on 4CE we have an "A" rating that is above 90, and we are actually beating out for customer satisfaction online people like Amazon, Vanguard, Google, and Expedia.

>> Not a bad group to beat out online. I wanted to ask you also about the Social Security offices, which still exist. What kind of traffic – what are the trends in people using the offices for visits in person?

>> So, our trend is to increase customer choice, all right? Our goal is to give, as with "my Social Security," to give customers an opportunity to do business with us wherever they are and whenever they need us. And so, we are getting away from bankers' hours. If you need to get a benefit verification letter to show what your benefit level is, if you need a replacement Social Security card, you can do that online with us. Now, we are doing that – it is good for us to have fewer people in the field offices, because it shortens lines. It also makes – you can also get – I'm sorry. You can also get a Medicare card, as well, online. We want to drive down traffic in our field offices so that routine requests, like getting a Medicare card, getting a Social Security card, getting a benefit verification letter, you can do that quickly online. That gives our staff a chance to provide better, more intense customer service for people who happen to have larger issues to deal with, and it shortens lines for our customers in the field office.

>> And when there is a change in policy, say, imposed in Congress, especially something like the claiming dates, which got a little bit more complicated in the last year,

how do you make sure that all of the employees at Social Security that deal with the public are totally up to speed on the details of changed rules?

>> That's just a matter of training down the line. Once we have the legislation, we get the regulations in place, it's simply a matter of educating staff down the line. And we do that through staff meetings, through video, various types of video training on a regular basis. We are training Social Security frontline employees on a weekly basis in our field offices and in our telephone service centers.

>> What else do we need to know about communications at SSA?

>> We are particularly happy this year that people are – we are rolling out a program of being able to get your replacement Social Security card online. The first thing you want to do is decide if you actually need a Social Security card. Number one, you don't want to carry your Social Security card with you. So don't order one so you can take it with you. You don't want it on your person all the time. You primarily need it if you're starting a new job and need to demonstrate citizenship and get things going on a new job. But if you do need a replacement Social Security card, we are working with the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators to have a very secure way to get you a new card in the District of Columbia, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Nebraska, New Mexico, Washington, and Wisconsin, and that list is going to grow over the course of the year.

>> Doug Walker is Deputy Commissioner of the Social Security Administration. You can share this interview with colleagues at FederalNewsRadio.com/FederalDrive. Just click "Share with friends."