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Reassignment Won't Fix the Largest-Ever Social Security Staffing Cut

By Kathleen Romig and Devin O'Connor

Over the past five months, the Trump Administration has forced the Social Security Administration (SSA) through a radical transformation that threatens to disrupt services for the largely older and severely disabled people who most rely on the agency.¹ The Trump Administration and its so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) have created huge gaps in customer service and support by indiscriminately pushing out 7,000 workers to hit an arbitrary staffing reduction target. This is the largest staffing cut in SSA's history.² (See Figure 1.)

Elon Musk's departure from government and a change in Trump-appointed leadership at SSA will not undo the harm to the public caused by the loss of experienced employees. SSA is reassigning thousands of staff to new roles in an ill-considered attempt to partially redress a problem of the Administration's own making. When the shuffling is complete, SSA will have fewer and less experienced staff on the front lines serving the public with significantly less support, leading to worse outcomes for people who rely on Social Security.

Trump Administration Created Unprecedented Hole in SSA Staffing

Beginning in January, the Trump Administration took a series of actions to push out thousands of SSA employees and reassign thousands more into new roles with steep learning curves.³ The first step was a DOGE-led, and questionably legal, government-wide Deferred Resignation Program encouraging federal employees to leave their jobs while continuing to be paid through September — the so-called “Fork in the Road.” SSA then offered financial incentives for what it characterized

¹ Jacob Leibenluft, Devin O'Connor, and Kathleen Romig, “Trump Administration, DOGE Activities Risk SSA Operations and Security of Personal Data,” CBPP, April 1, 2025, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/social-security/trump-administration-doge-activities-risk-ssa-operations-and-security-of>.

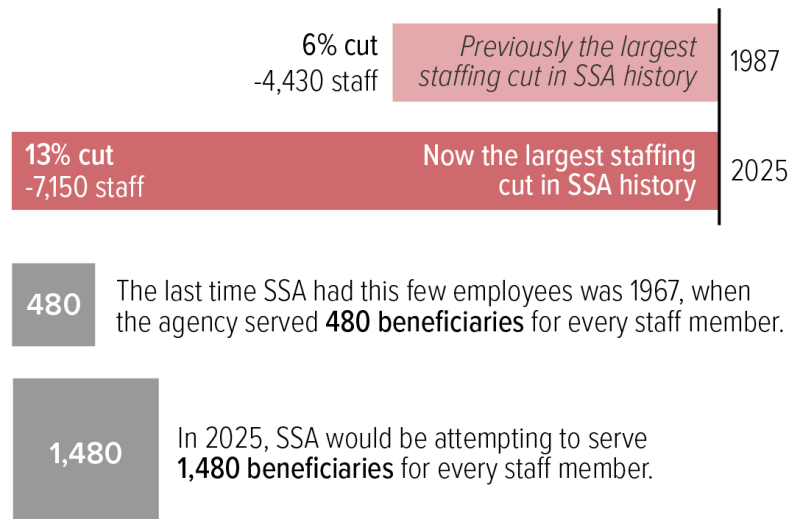
² SSA, “Social Security Announces Workforce and Organization Plans,” February 28, 2025, <https://blog.ssa.gov/social-security-announces-workforce-and-organization-plans/>. SSA outlined plans to reach 50,000 employees by the end of fiscal year 2025, a decrease of roughly 7,150 staff (13 percent). The largest previous one-year decline was when SSA's full-time staff decreased by 4,433 (6 percent) between the end of fiscal year 1986 and fiscal year 1987. See U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “Social Security Administration 1988 Annual Report to the Congress,” <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo.31924062259266&seq=100>.

³ Office of Personnel Management, “Original Email to Employees,” January 28, 2025, <https://www.opm.gov/fork/original-email-to-employees/>.

publicly as its “bloated workforce” to resign or retire.⁴ At the same time, agency leadership repeatedly threatened mass layoffs (reductions-in-force, or RIFs) or forced relocations — perhaps to field offices far away from where employees lived and worked — if not enough employees volunteered to resign or be reassigned to different roles.⁵

FIGURE 1

Trump Administration and DOGE Making Largest Staffing Cut in SSA History



Source: Authors' analysis based on US Department of Health, Education and Welfare Annual Reports to Congress, Social Security Administration Annual Reports to Congress, SSA Annual Statistical Supplements, and SSI Annual Statistical Reports.

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Ultimately, thousands of employees resigned — including nearly half of the agency’s senior executives — leading to an unprecedented “brain drain” of experience and talent.⁶ While SSA has not disclosed which roles were left empty by the mass staffing exodus, it did identify dozens of field offices across 28 states where at least a quarter of staff accepted incentives to resign, leaving the offices critically understaffed.⁷

⁴ SSA, “Social Security Announces Options to its Workforce,” February 27, 2025, <https://www.ssa.gov/news/press/releases/2025/#2025-02-27>; SSA, “Social Security Announces Workforce and Organization Plans.”

⁵ Tim Reid, “Trump’s Mass Layoff Threat Drives US Government Workers to Resign,” May 20, 2025, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/business/world-at-work/trumps-mass-layoff-threat-drives-us-government-workers-resign-2025-05-20/>.

⁶ Alexandra Berzon, Nicholas Nehamas, and Tara Siegel Bernard, “The Bureaucrat and the Billionaire: Inside DOGE’s Chaotic Takeover of Social Security,” New York Times, June 16, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/16/us/politics/doge-social-security.html>; Hannah Natanson *et al.*, “Trump’s actions are pushing thousands of experts to flee government,” Washington Post, May 17, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2025/05/17/trump-administration-brain-drain-doge/>.

⁷ Charles Hall, “Field Office Losses Under VSIP,” Social Security News, April 4, 2025, <https://socsecnews.blogspot.com/2025/04/field-office-losses-under-vsip.html>.

Reassignment Will Be Insufficient to Fix SSA Customer Service Woes

Rapid and haphazard staff losses threaten to severely disrupt SSA's services to the public. To partially mitigate the damage, the Trump Administration reassigned 2,000 of the remaining SSA employees to backfill vacancies in field offices, teleservice centers, or processing centers — or to help address the backlog in disability benefit applications.⁸ Although these employees have SSA experience, many bring little relevant knowledge and some will be ill-suited to their new roles. The learning curve will be steep and may be difficult to climb — especially without adequate training. For example, former IT help desk employees will now be tasked with helping make disability decisions and former HR specialists must now master SSA's complex benefit rules.⁹

Meanwhile, reassignment is creating even deeper holes in headquarters and regional offices that provide crucial support for their colleagues. For example:

- Field office staff are struggling to resolve the most difficult cases, due to disproportionate losses and reassignments in SSA's regional offices, which provide daily support to their colleagues in the field by answering complex policy questions and troubleshooting system problems.¹⁰
- System outages are more frequent and longer lasting, due to the losses and reassignments of SSA staff charged with maintaining the complex web of systems that allow other staff to take claims, make decisions, and ensure that benefits are delivered.¹¹
- Staff across the agency are experiencing long delays getting and maintaining the tools they need to do their jobs due to losses and reassignments of IT staff, who repair and replace broken equipment. These challenges have been compounded by newly instituted burdensome purchase card restrictions.¹²

Speed or Quality Will Suffer as SSA Tries to Do More With Fewer and Less Experienced Workers

Fewer people facing the same workload with less experience and weakened agency support will inevitably lead to longer wait times for benefits, more errors, or both. It typically takes two years for a new claims representative or disability examiner to become proficient in consistently and quickly

⁸ Social Security Administration, "Social Security Administration Highlights Key Accomplishments in the First 100 Days of the Trump Administration," April 29, 2025, https://www.ssa.gov/news/press/releases/2025/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery#2025-04-29.

⁹ Berzon, Nehamas, and Siegel Bernard.

¹⁰ Jory Heckman, "SSA shifts to X posts for official messaging after cuts to communications staff," April 11, 2025, Federal News Network, <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/agency-oversight/2025/04/ssa-shifts-to-x-posts-for-official-messaging-after-cuts-to-communications-staff/>.

¹¹ Lisa Rein, Hannah Natanson and Elizabeth Dwoskin, "Social Security website keeps crashing, as DOGE demands cuts to IT staff," April 7, 2025, Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/04/07/social-security-website-crashes-musk-trump/>.

¹² Ken Thomas, "How Federal Workers Are Dealing With the \$1 Limit on Their Corporate Cards," March 4, 2025, Wall Street Journal, <https://www.wsj.com/politics/policy/trump-doge-federal-credit-card-freeze-994bcf0e>.

handling large, complex workloads. In addition, reassigned staff will require significant on-the-job training from more experienced colleagues, pulling them away from their own work.

SSA faces a difficult choice: accept bigger backlogs and longer delays or improperly rush inexperienced staff to handle more complicated cases, driving up error rates in the process. Sacrificing quality for speed could reduce backlogs and processing times in the short run. But in the long run, inconsistent and incorrect benefit decisions will be time-consuming and costly to fix if applicants appeal, and many eligible applicants will never gain access to the benefits they earned during their working lives.

Over time, SSA hopes to address some of its self-inflicted staffing shortfall through expanded technological investments, leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) to address more of the agency's customer service responsibilities. However, eliminating significant staff capacity before such solutions have been developed, tested, deployed, and iterated on is a serious unforced error. The harm will be compounded if the agency moves too quickly and recklessly with technology. For example, callers ended up in frustrating "doom loops" after recently deployed — but apparently insufficiently tested — changes to the AI chatbot on the agency's 800 number aimed at reducing the need for teleservice center agents.¹³

Of course, SSA should be undertaking customer-centered technological modernization. The agency was doing just that before the Trump Administration eliminated SSA's Office of Transformation, which had been expanding digital services and reducing red tape.¹⁴ The new commissioner has given responsibility for technological modernization to DOGE staff with insufficient knowledge of SSA's programs, systems, and the older and disabled population it serves.¹⁵ Meanwhile, SSA has pushed out many of the staff who could provide that expertise. As a result, efforts to upgrade the agency's technology could end up harming Social Security applicants and beneficiaries.

Trump Administration Doubling Down on Mistakes Rather Than Learning Lessons

Had the Trump Administration and DOGE prioritized improving Social Security customer service, they could have identified goals — such as reducing telephone wait times and claims backlogs — and developed a staffing plan that prioritized recruitment and retention for jobs that helped meet those goals. Even if their aim had only been to *minimize* harm to customer service while reducing staff, agency leadership could have exempted certain functions or offices. In fact, Acting Social Security Commissioner Michelle King, a long-serving career executive, exempted SSA operations staff from the first round of the Deferred Resignation Program and early retirement

¹³ Hannah Natanson, Lisa Rein and Meryl Kornfield, "How DOGE's grand plan to remake Social Security is backfiring," May 16, 2025, Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/05/16/doge-social-security-musk-trump-cuts/>.

¹⁴ Natalie Alms, "Social Security shuts its civil rights and transformation offices," Government Executive, February 26, 2025, <https://www.govexec.com/management/2025/02/social-security-shutters-its-civil-rights-and-transformation-offices/403310/>.

¹⁵ Anne Tergesen, "Social Security Chief Says Musk's DOGE Figures Heavily in Agency's Plans," June 9, 2025, Wall Street Journal, <https://www.wsj.com/politics/policy/social-security-chief-says-musks-doge-figures-heavily-in-agencys-plans-45cc0f35>.

incentives.¹⁶ But after forcing King out in February, DOGE and the Trump Administration prioritized shedding as many staff as quickly as possible, creating losses in critical areas the agency is now scrambling to partially backfill. This is the opposite of efficiency. SSA is now paying thousands of experienced staff not to work, even as it pays a premium to their less-experienced replacements.¹⁷

The Trump Administration should be reversing course. Instead, SSA hiring remains frozen — even though the agency’s customer service staff are exempted from the government-wide hiring freeze in place through at least mid-July — while the Trump Administration is seeking to politicize and strip the remaining SSA workforce of their civil service protections to make them easier to remove without cause in the future, likely further sapping morale.¹⁸ But even if they did reverse course, it would likely take years to undo the impacts of the unnecessary and unprecedented loss of experience and talent that has already taken place at SSA.

¹⁶ Aaron Navarro, “Social Security Administration offering voluntary buyouts ahead of “significant workforce reductions,” February 27, 2025, CBS News, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/social-security-administration-offering-voluntary-buyouts-ahead-of-significant-workforce-reductions/>.

¹⁷ Reassigned employees who previously held a higher-paid role may continue to receive their previous salary for two years. Office of Personnel Management, “Fact Sheet: Pay Retention,” <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/pay-leave/pay-administration/fact-sheets/pay-retention/>.

¹⁸ As of June 20, 2025, there were no jobs at the Social Security Administration listed on USAJobs. Devin O’Connor and Kathleen Romig, “Trump Administration Politicizing Social Security Administration Will Further Undermine Benefits,” CBPP, May 8, 2025, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/trump-administration-politicizing-social-security-administration-will-further-undermine>.