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Social Security Administration Cuts Hurt Every State

By Kathleen Romig

With the baby boom generation now squarely in its peak years for retirement and disability, the demands on the Social Security Administration (SSA) are extraordinarily high. Yet Congress has *cut* SSA's core operating budget by 17 percent since 2010, after adjusting for inflation.¹ These cuts hurt SSA's service to the public in every state. The agency has been forced to shutter field offices and shrink its staff, leading to longer waits for service and growing backlogs. While the overall effect is a decline in service nationwide, the effects of the cuts vary considerably by state.

- SSA's staff shrank by 15 percent nationwide between 2010 and 2021, so there are fewer people to take appointments, answer phones, and process applications for Social Security's vital retirement, survivors, and disability benefits.² As a result, workers and beneficiaries must wait longer to be served. Four states — Alaska, Iowa, Virginia, and West Virginia — and Puerto Rico have each lost more than 25 percent of their staff since 2010.
- In addition to its own staff, SSA funds state Disability Determination Service (DDS) employees, who decide whether applicants' disabilities are severe enough to qualify for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI). DDS staff shrank by 16 percent nationwide between 2010 and 2021. Eight states — Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Montana, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia — each lost over 30 percent of their DDS staff.

SSA primarily serves people who are older or disabled, often at difficult moments in their lives such as the onset of a disability or the death of a spouse. Its clients are diverse and include people with cognitive difficulties and people with limited ability to speak English. Its staff provide critical guidance to workers making complex, life-altering decisions. Providing prompt and thorough service reduces errors that SSA staff must fix later. In order to provide good customer service, SSA needs adequate staffing — which requires an increase in funding.

¹ Kathleen Romig, "Policymakers Must Act to Address Social Security Service Crisis," CBPP, May 26, 2022, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/policymakers-must-act-to-address-social-security-service-crisis>

² The numbers of staff in this report refer to full-time permanent staff on duty. SSA has other ways of measuring its workforce, including full-time-equivalent staff and work years, which we cite in other contexts, which also show significant declines. For instance, full-time-equivalent staff shrank by 13 percent between 2010 and 2021.

Adequate Staffing Needed to Provide Good Customer Service

About three-fourths of SSA's operating budget goes for staff, and the majority of SSA's staff provide direct service to the public. As a result, funding cuts unavoidably result in service gaps. Tight budgets have forced SSA to cut staff by attrition, which results in uneven patterns across the country.

SSA's front-line staff serve tens of millions of Americans every year. Its national toll-free telephone number serves as the gateway to the agency's services, fielding 31 million calls in 2021.³ Here, trained agents provide services such as answering questions about SSA's programs, taking claims for retirement benefits, and setting up appointments.

SSA also maintains a network of over 1,200 field offices across the country. Field office staff served 43 million applicants and beneficiaries in 2019, before SSA closed the office to in-person service due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and are again serving the public in person this year. Field office staff take claims for Social Security and SSI benefits, provide replacement Social Security cards, and process name changes. They offer personalized information for applicants navigating complex decisions about when to retire, and make decisions about whether beneficiaries are capable of managing their own finances. In addition, they enroll beneficiaries in Medicare and its Extra Help program for low-income beneficiaries, and help beneficiaries apply for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps).

SSA's behind-the-scenes work is equally important for ensuring prompt and accurate service. SSA's payment service centers handle tasks such as awarding widows' benefits when their spouses die, issuing back payments for SSDI beneficiaries who waited a year or more for a hearing, and resolving complex claims issues.

SSA also funds state DDS employees, who decide whether applicants' disabilities are severe enough to qualify for SSDI or SSI benefits.⁴

Budget cuts have forced SSA to shrink its staff. As a result, SSA staffing is at its lowest level in 25 years, and the agency is currently under a hiring freeze because of insufficient funding.⁵ SSA lost roughly 11,000 employees between 2010 and 2021 and expects to lose another 4,500 front-line employees this year.⁶ State DDSs lost roughly 2,500 employees between 2010 and 2021 and attrition over the past year is over 25 percent.⁷ Inevitably, understaffing means that beneficiaries must wait

³ Social Security Administration, *Fiscal Year 2021 Agency Financial Report*, <https://www.ssa.gov/finance/2021/Full%20FY%202021%20AFR.pdf>.

⁴ For Social Security and SSI, disability is defined as the inability to earn above the substantial gainful activity threshold (\$1,350 per month in 2022) because of a medically determinable physical or mental impairment(s) that can be expected to result in death or last at least 12 months.

⁵ Grace Kim, SSA, Statement for the Record, House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Social Security, May 17, 2022, <https://waysandmeans.house.gov/sites/democrats.waysandmeans.house.gov/files/documents/Kim%20Testimony.pdf>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

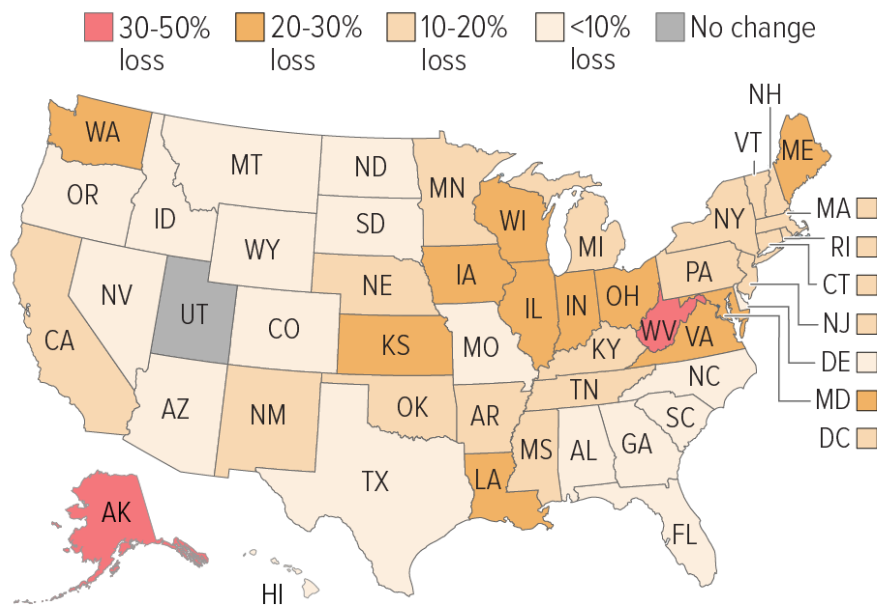
longer to be served. The average processing time for an initial disability claim had held fairly steady in recent years at three to four months, but has been rising and reached over six months in April 2022.⁸ One million applicants awaited a decision on their disability benefit applications as of April 1, 2022.⁹

SSA and DDS staff losses are spread unevenly across the nation, as Figures 1 and 2 and Appendix Table 1 show. While SSA’s staff nationwide shrank by 15 percent between 2010 and 2021, the declines in Alaska, Iowa, Puerto Rico, Virginia, and West Virginia each exceeded 25 percent. Similarly, DDS staff nationwide shrank by 16 percent over that period, but Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Montana, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia each lost more than 30 percent.

FIGURE 1

Social Security Administration Has Lost Significant Number of Staff

Percent change in staff, fiscal years 2010-2021



Source: Social Security Administration

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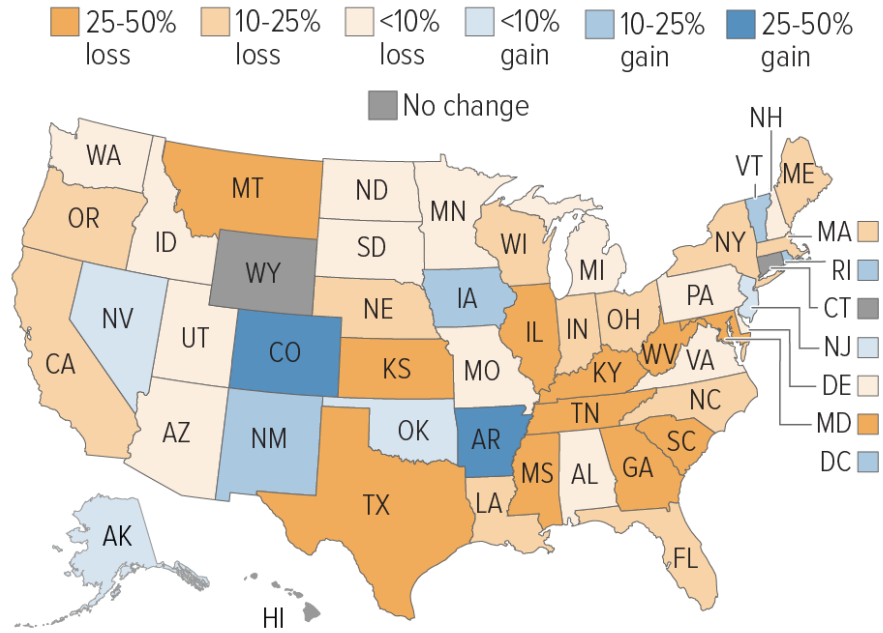
⁸ SSA, “Social Security Administration (SSA) Monthly Data for Combined Title II Disability & Title XVI Blind & Disabled Average Processing Time,” <https://www.ssa.gov/open/data/Combined-Disability-Processing-Time.html>. SSA, Office of Inspector General, “Comparing the Social Security Administration’s Disability Determination Services’ Workload Statistics During the COVID-19 Pandemic to Prior Years,” December 2021, <https://www.oversight.gov/sites/default/files/oig-reports/SSA/01-21-51038.pdf>.

⁹ Faigy Gilder, “A Grim Milestone: More Than One Million Pending Disability Cases,” National Organization of Social Security Claimants’ Representatives, April 1, 2022, <https://nossacr.org/a-grim-milestone-more-than-one-million-pending-disability-cases/>.

FIGURE 2

Disability Determination Services Staff Have Shrunk in Many States

Percent change in staff, fiscal years 2010-2021



Source: Social Security Administration

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APPENDIX TABLE 1

Social Security and Disability Staff Changes by State

	Social Security Administration Staff			Disability Determination Services Staff		
	FY 2010	FY 2021	% Change	FY 2010	FY 2021	% Change
Alabama	2,713	2514	-7%	365	362	-1%
Alaska	76	38	-50%	23	25	9%
American Samoa	5	5	0%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Arizona	706	679	-4%	223	220	-1%
Arkansas	534	437	-18%	404	543	34%
California	6,991	5892	-16%	1,440	1287	-11%
Colorado	705	658	-7%	117	157	34%
Connecticut	403	332	-18%	114	114	0%
Delaware	110	102	-7%	41	37	-10%
Dist. of Columbia	239	202	-15%	49	57	16%

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	FY 2010	FY 2021	% Change	FY 2010	FY 2021	% Change
Florida	2,753	2601	-6%	1,045	852	-18%
Georgia	1,777	1604	-10%	523	354	-32%
Guam	13	16	23%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Hawai'i	135	123	-9%	42	42	0%
Idaho	149	140	-6%	63	61	-3%
Illinois	3,422	2725	-20%	515	333	-35%
Indiana	925	717	-22%	328	260	-21%
Iowa	343	243	-29%	129	155	20%
Kansas	333	256	-23%	104	53	-49%
Kentucky	825	703	-15%	424	315	-26%
Louisiana	799	611	-24%	287	233	-19%
Maine	209	167	-20%	58	52	-10%
Maryland	12,749	10173	-20%	232	163	-30%
Massachusetts	1,200	1020	-15%	250	218	-13%
Michigan	1,543	1275	-17%	594	542	-9%
Minnesota	493	411	-17%	182	167	-8%
Mississippi	639	522	-18%	320	225	-30%
Missouri	2,784	2511	-10%	361	332	-8%
Montana	125	113	-10%	46	29	-37%
Nebraska	182	151	-17%	77	67	-13%
Nevada	265	264	0%	95	100	5%
New Hampshire	151	132	-13%	51	49	-4%
New Jersey	905	799	-12%	298	306	3%
New Mexico	961	801	-17%	86	103	20%
New York	4,099	3619	-12%	934	711	-24%
North Carolina	1,328	1309	-1%	679	555	-18%
North Dakota	95	88	-7%	22	20	-9%
Ohio	1,794	1385	-23%	589	501	-15%
Oklahoma	563	462	-18%	308	333	8%
Oregon	428	387	-10%	195	166	-15%
Pennsylvania	4,510	3918	-13%	704	658	-7%
Puerto Rico	*	328		142	108	-24%
Rhode Island	166	148	-11%	47	53	13%
Northern Mariana Islands	6	5	-17%	N/A	N/A	N/A
South Carolina	661	605	-8%	403	239	-41%
South Dakota	94	87	-7%	33	32	-3%
Tennessee	1,073	934	-13%	533	335	-37%
Texas	3,477	3279	-6%	1,034	618	-40%

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	FY 2010	FY 2021	% Change	FY 2010	FY 2021	% Change
Utah	176	176	0%	73	72	-1%
Vermont	62	53	-15%	34	38	12%
Virgin Islands	12	11	-8%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Virginia	2,193	1616	-26%	447	426	-5%
Washington	1,627	1264	-22%	318	297	-7%
West Virginia	454	303	-33%	227	153	-33%
Wisconsin	724	553	-24%	233	201	-14%
Wyoming	44	40	-9%	15	15	0%
Total	70,202*	59,507	-15%	15,856	13,344	-16%

* Total includes nine staff with no state or territory identified.

Notes: In states with Extended Service Teams (EST) that assist Disability Determination Services (DDS) in processing disability applications, both EST and DDS staff are included in totals. DDS operations for American Samoa, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands are run out of the San Francisco Regional Office. DDS operations for the Virgin Islands are run out of the New York Regional Office.

Source: Social Security Administration