

# FrontLine

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## President's Message

By Rick Warsinskey, President, NCSSMA

SSA finally has a budget for Fiscal Year 2007. We know in our discussions in recent weeks on the Hill that, initially, the money was not there for SSA to avoid a furlough. It was only through a huge effort on your part along with other groups that joined us in this effort that a furlough was avoided. As always, our key supporters on the Hill worked hard on our behalf. This budget feels like a knock-down drag-out fight that ended in a draw. We survived.

That is the good news. The bad news is we are still faced with increasing workloads and a shrinking workforce. The Field has already lost 2,000 positions in the past 18 months and little hiring is expected this year. Our expectation is that we will have lost about 4,000 people SSA wide from Fiscal Year 2006 to 2008.

We are going to continue to make every effort to pursue more funding for SSA. We will keep this a high priority to ensure that we can prevent a further erosion in the level of service we are able to provide. We believe that community based service should continue to be the strong foundation upon which the structure of Social Security's public service is built. By providing good service in Field Offices, we are providing a stable service base which will enable us as an agency to move forward to enhanced telephone and Internet services.

The options for Fiscal Year 2007 for SSA are not easy. We know SSA will be under tremendous pressure to deal with a massive backlog in hearings. SSA also has growing systems problems that are slowing down our work production. Additional resources would certainly assist in addressing these challenges, but they aren't in the cards for this year.

When NCSSMA last met with Agency executives, we were told that *"because of growing workloads and tighter budgets, we must be realistic and recognize that SSA will not be able to get enough additional staff to handle everyone in our Field Offices. The more people we serve through other channels, the better we can serve those who continue to visit our offices. In addition, there are growing segments of the public who prefer to use the phone or the Internet. If SSA is to continue as a leader in government at service delivery, we need a new definition of what good service means in 2006 and the future."*

Is the prognosis of the above quote our immediate future in SSA? A casual reading might lead one to conclude that lowering service standards and redefining "acceptable" is a potential strategy. We don't think redefinition is the answer and we don't think that increasing the use of phone and Internet service will solve the problem.

We do not believe SSA is in any position right now to handle more work by telephone. The 1-800 Number is at or near capacity and Field Offices, which receive over 50% more business related calls than the 1-800 Number, are well beyond capacity to answer more calls. Can the Internet relieve Field Offices? In the long run we believe it will provide some relief, but we do not think SSA can significantly ramp up Internet services until the applications provide less back end work for Field Offices. The Internet is not a magical solution. Speeding up the input without attention to how the output will be handled is ill-advised.

So, Fiscal Year 2007 promises to be a very challenging year. We can expect there will be a lot of options considered. Some possibilities include:

1. Closing and/or consolidating a number of Field Offices.
2. Further pulling back on serving stewardship workloads such as CDRs and SSI redeterminations.
3. Reducing the hours that offices are open to the public and reducing the help we can provide to the public.

Do I believe these things will happen in FY 2007? I don't know. I do believe that we can't continue business as usual if we don't get more funds.

Many will argue that before we do this that we may need to reduce other parts of the agency and shift all available positions to Field Offices. This could mean cutting other components including Regional Offices. No matter the strategy, public service must come first -- and public service is delivered at the front lines.

The public is walking through our doors in droves and our phone lines are being overwhelmed. We know what the public wants from us. They want good face-to-

face and telephone service. The public has paid for and deserves the best service we can provide. But we must have more resources to provide this service. This is not whining. This is not posturing. It is a plain and simple fact demonstrated every day on the front lines of SSA.

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### **View from the Heartland**

Jim Hughes, District Manager, St. Louis, MO & President KCMA

*Things do not change; we change. Henry David Thoreau*

*If nothing ever changed there'd be no butterflies. Unknown*

*Usually, terrible things that are done with the excuse that progress requires them are not really progress at all, but just terrible things. Russell Baker*

Every cliché about change implies that your failure to embrace change is a bad thing. I am a recent convert. I do embrace change. The changes I embrace are changes in support of providing the best possible service to the public. Sufficient staff which is well trained and equipped would be a very welcome change for the field. It would be a change not to have growing waiting times and few available appointments. It would be a change to do a really first rate job answering all of the phone calls every field office receives. So, you see this is the change that I embrace. I believe this change can happen; it just takes an adjustment in resources and a determination to settle for nothing short of excellence.

The NCSSMA has a vision for service in which 'community based service' is at the core of what we believe the FICA paying taxpayer wants and needs. We believe that electronic access (while valuable) will only serve to supplement community based service and may assist the Social Security Administration in meeting the challenges that demographics will present. Age, disability and the one-time nature of filing for Social Security benefits, we believe, drive otherwise capable people to seek field office assistance. In addition, the complexities of the program based on issues such as the retirement test, benefits available on other records, insured status and proof(s) of age and relationship continue to require the skills of trained interviewers. In light of these issues why has the field suffered the brunt of personnel loss when compared with other components of SSA?

The change we seek is the reordering of priorities within Social Security. We must advocate for adequate resources to meet the challenges that the baby boomer demographic represents. Our offices should have an environment conducive to providing the best possible services to those seeking their hard earned benefits. Decisions made in support of this vision will incrementally carry field offices to the place we need to be. Let us all embrace this change and never allow that service to the public has grown out of style.

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### **Why Should I Become a Member?**

By Jim Burkert, District Manager, Spokane WA & NCSSMA Treasurer

Every year, the management association works on a variety of issues that support our aim of improving service to the public and of supporting field and TSC managers. In the past, we have been instrumental in obtaining upgrades for a wide variety of field and TSC positions. We have also successfully argued for higher budgets for SSA and increased numbers of supervisors and managers. Here are a few recent

accomplishments and activities:

- ✦ In recent years, NCSSMA has devoted much time and resources to lobbying Congress for an adequate budget for SSA. NCSSMA has been an important voice on Capitol Hill advocating for adequate resources for SSA. In 2006, as a result of an intense grassroots campaign by our membership, a letter carrying the signatures of 54 Senators was sent to the Senate leadership in November expressing the need for a higher SSA budget. The end result was that a more reasonable budget is now on track for approval and it appears that furloughs will be avoided.
- ✦ This fall, NCSSMA expressed serious concerns to DCO about systems sanctions issues, especially as they pertain to managers and their exercise of referent power. Also of concern was the fact that managers are not afforded the same rights of representation and due process as bargaining unit employees. In response to our concerns, DCO has convened a workgroup to study the issues. NCSSMA is represented on the workgroup.
- ✦ For several years, NCSSMA has advocated for increased numbers of true supervisory positions in the field and TSC. With the advent of PACS, this has become even more crucial. We have seen slow improvement in this over the past couple of years. Recently, however, the pace of conversions from MSS to OS/US positions has increased dramatically.
- ✦ Over the past several months, NCSSMA has expressed concerns and provided suggestions for improvement about a variety of technical issues that affect service or otherwise impact field/TSC operations. These include:
  - Failure to afford due process for persons in LAF D9
  - Systems failures resulting from the November software releases
  - The need for better management information on VIP
  - The need to pursue electronic verification of vital records for enumeration and claims purposes
  - Ways to enhance Ework
  - NCSSMA provides comments on literally hundreds of technical and policy proposals throughout the course of a year. These include POMS/MSOM transmittals as well as policy changes such as evidentiary requirements on enumeration, monthly wage verifications, and IVT training among many others.
  - NCSSMA has representatives on many national workgroups including:
    - PACS Implementation
    - Systems Sanctions
    - Field office design
    - Service Level Indicator
    - Modernized Training Vision Workgroup
    - TSC Steering Committee
  - NCSSMA participates in a monthly conference call with the Office of Automation Support to discuss systems performance and ways to improve it. In addition NCSSMA had a spot on the agenda at last summer's OAS Automation Workshop where we presented our views on systems performance in terms of how it affects field and TSC operations.

Many of our members have expressed appreciation that they get information through the management association that they do not get anywhere else. This can include legislative bulletins from our Government Relations Consultant, technical information, and news of things going on in different regions. This kind of information sharing keeps us all connected as managers and supervisors.

Your membership enables you to have access to this information. Your membership also supports the ability of the organization to achieve the results shown above. Be a part of an organization that works for

you and the things we all value - join today.

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## We Are Good Neighbors

By Sheila Pendarvis, District Manager, Camden, SC (*at the time of her service at the Katrina Relief Center, she was Operations Supervisor in the Columbia, South Carolina District office*)

In late August 2005 news of Hurricane Katrina's coming spread across the country. Social Security employees in the Columbia SC office chatted about it, but went about completing their normal daily tasks. The routine of busy everyday life continued on as usual.

As the devastating aftermath of the storm became apparent, we were all in awe of its magnitude. We held out hope for those who were affected both directly and indirectly. We watched the Social Security updates and whispered prayers for the well being of all.

When it was announced that Columbia Mayor Bob Coble, had offered direct relief to evacuees, the City of Columbia immediately went into preparation mode. My manager, Darrell Sheffield, was informed of the emergency preparation meeting, and he asked me to represent our agency. The meeting was held at the Chamber of Commerce which is located across the street from the Federal Building that houses the Columbia Social Security office. I marveled at the detailed level of planning taking place as state and local leaders brainstormed. There was much to be done before the first airplane arrived in 2-3 days. I listened as one individual from Congressman Clyburn's office expressed distaste with the use of the term 'refugees' when referring to these people who were American citizens. Several verbal expressions of agreement from the floor resulted in a consensus-- "*Let's call them our neighbors.*" Use of the term 'refugee' ceased.

The relief organization was quickly coined SC Cares. SC Cares, led by Samuel Tennebaum, a local businessman, coordinated and managed the overall relief effort. Public and private entities joined hands working toward the common goal of providing basic necessities and even a few small comforts for our new neighbors. The vacant Naval Reserve Center was to be transformed into a one-stop relief post. In addition to providing space for the essential FEMA and Red Cross workers, local officials created a secure area for doctors to administer treatment and medications. Federal, state and local government agencies were offered areas to set up shop to serve customers. Knowing that location of the SSA office is always crucial to its clients, I was prompted to leave directly from the initial planning meeting to select our location in the center. I chose an office on the ground floor, near the front door, the kitchen, FEMA and the Red Cross intake area. This location proved to be ideal; we were visible and very accessible.

"SC Cares" was off and running, preparing for the first planeload of neighbors to arrive. Because of the close communication with and full support of the Columbia management team, I was able to construct a schedule for small teams of service and claims representatives to provide needed services at the offsite location. Our ASC provided the critical technical support needed for lap top computers and printers. We were ready for action, and anxious to serve.

We were placed on alert when the first plane landed. Within moments, or so it seemed, the doors of the Center gave way to hundreds of forlorn survivors. They were emotionally drained, frustrated, physically tattered, hungry and lost. Most needed to talk about their ordeal. They spoke of being plucked off of roof tops by helicopters. They talked about being placed on planes with no knowledge of the destination until long after being in the air. They were looking frantically for missing loved ones, and rejoicing for having found them. Many had no identification. Others carried wet important papers in zip-lock bags that had been grabbed before escaping to their attics. Some who had been forced to flee the floodwaters of New Orleans viewed the airlift to South Carolina as a form of subjugation. Social Security employees welcomed, listened, smiled, and hugged.

We helped them organize papers, queried our records, and wrote hundreds of checks. We worked until 9 pm on the first day.

On the second day, a gentleman came to our desk with a toothless smile. He shared how he had paid in advance for dental work that could not be rendered. The dentist's office was across the street from his home. He saw the office and equipment destroyed by the storm. The Red Cross arranged for local dental services, but required that he submit proof of his SSN, which we provided. When he returned a week later, he stood at the door as I was interviewing someone. Pointing to his mouth, sporting very good looking teeth, he proudly stated, "I got teeth." He just wanted to say thanks. I saw him at a department store a few months later. He had settled into an apartment and was working two jobs.

I also recall with fondness Mr. Hicks, an elderly beneficiary who came by regularly just to say how grateful he was for checks we had provided. During one visit he shared the news of a good South Carolinian who had driven him to New Orleans to find his cat. His story made national news and caught the interest of National Geographic.

Providing all ranges of Social Security services to the Katrina survivors became my total focus for several months. I arrived in the morning carrying lap tops and printers; for security purposes they were not left in the building overnight. Relief organizers and everyone else were taken aback when I arrived for a meeting, and opened for business on Columbus Day. Word quickly spread, that Social Security did not take off for the holiday. I often delivered checks to hotels after leaving the Center. At times system problems created a need to deliver printouts to individuals at their hotels. As the Katrina disaster waned from the front page of the newspapers, and other agencies pulled out of the relief site, I impressed upon my manager the importance of Social Security continuing to extend a helping hand until there was no more work for us to do. I worked closely with the relief effort until mid-December 2005.

The Columbia Social Security Office received numerous accolades as a result of the outstanding efforts put forth by dedicated and compassionate employees. As a result of that effort, in November 2005, I was invited by Board Chair Sam Tennenbaum to attend the Central Carolina Community Foundation's annual meeting. He announced to everyone that Social Security was a hard working and caring agency that did not stop for a holiday! I was also selected by SC Senator Joel Lourie, to be one of the special Modern Day Maccabee honorees at the annual lighting of the Menorah, an excerpt of the invitation read: *As scores of sufferers from the devastating trauma of hurricane Katrina fled to our city, your actions displayed the very best that leadership can mean to our modern-day society.* Ours was the only Federal agency in Columbia to which such an honor was bestowed. The Jewish Community viewed our agency as a source of light in the devastating darkness.

The Columbia area residents and media acknowledged our agency as a stronghold of public service.

The truth is, for us, it was no big deal. It's just what we do. *We are very good neighbors.*

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### **A Day in the Life of a First Line Supervisor**

By Susan M. King, Operations Supervisor, South Bend, IN

Where do I begin? I have been the Operations Supervisor (OS) in South Bend, Indiana Social Security field office since April 2005. My main responsibility is supervising the SSI and Service Representative (SR) units. Our service area covers 3 counties, 1282 square miles and a population of 331,800 people. Our SR's handle an average of 275-325 customers a day, our Claims Representatives (CR's) process an average of 50

appointments per day and the phone rings non-stop.

Under our roof we house 1 District Manager, 1 Assistant District Manager, 1 Operations Supervisor, 2 Technical Experts (TE), 6 SR's, 6 T16 CR's, 5 T2 CR's, 4 Generalists, 3/5 of an ASC, 3 SDW Cadre TE's, 1 PAS, 1 Senior Aide, 1 high school intern and a partridge in a pear tree. I believe there was one day in December 2005, when the wind chill was 8 below, that we weren't too busy and we were able to handle the walk-in traffic, phone calls, appointments and general inquiries with relative ease. Outside of that day, it's a daily challenge and it often seems that all I do is put out fires all day long. One OS told me there were days when she got to work, put her purse down in the middle of her chair, and when she left at the end of the day her purse was in the same spot.

Let me describe a typical hour of my day for you, such as this afternoon at 3:00. I am at my desk, working on an analysis of the productivity of each CR and SR. I look up to check VIP to see how long the waiting time is up front. There are 38 customers waiting and the longest waiting time is 80 minutes. Seeing it is time to call up the troops (CR's to be SR's) I get ready to send a VIP message to the staff. I see in VIP there is an interview waiting for a CR for 30 minutes past their appointment time. I get up to find the CR; not at her desk, not in the breakroom, not up front interviewing, maybe in the bathroom? As I peek in the bathroom, a SR catches me and tells me they have an Immediate Payment (IP) that needs approval. I go back to my desk to input the approval, and the administrative line rings. I answer it on the 2<sup>nd</sup> ring and it is Payment Center on the line wanting to know the status of a PCAC's request they sent 2 months ago. I take the message and promise to check it out and get back to them by the end of the day. Then I am back to approving the IP. I ask the SR what the dire need situation is, and they say they didn't get their check. As I explain that doesn't constitute dire need, I am told the claimant is going to be kicked out of their apartment if they don't get their money today, they have no food or medication and they are up front hysterical claiming that they have nowhere else to go, and by the way, they have alcohol on their breath. In the middle of this story, another SR approaches me and states someone up front demands to speak to a supervisor. The customer is trying to get a replacement card, has no ID, and doesn't understand why we can't give them a printout of their number because they just got a job and can't start unless they have a printout of their number. I go back to my desk to try to send the VIP message to have some CR's go up and take care of the now 46 customers that are waiting 90 minutes. Just as I send the message, the guard comes up to me and says there are 20 picketers in front of the building carrying signs. He doesn't know what it's about, but he thought I should know. The administrative line rings again and I catch it on the 3<sup>rd</sup> ring this time. It is the congressman's office wanting status on a hearing that was filed 3 months ago. When I hang up from the congressman's office, there are 3 people standing in line outside my cubicle with problems they need help with.

Well, I think you get the point. It is never boring here. The stress is too much at times, but it is always interesting, challenging and memorable. Like the time we had someone die in the waiting room, or the weekly (sometimes daily) event of escorting someone out of the office for being unruly, loud, threatening and/or out of control. One day, the duress alarm went off. I briskly walked up front to find our 250 pound guard separating 2 fist fighting females in the waiting room. I approached to help, and the guard firmly walked one of them out. After a few minutes of separation, I walked the other outside also. After I turned around to come back in, I noticed a set of shiny brass knuckles on her fingers.

In summary, it is hard to get anything done, such as an analysis of workload processed, unless it is done after hours, when everyone is gone and I can think a thought straight through. That is why I'm still at work at 10:00 at night, writing this article.

By Doug Loux, Management Support Specialist, Holyoke, MA & NESSMA Grassroots Coordinator

If there is one constant for field office and TSC management it is change. Independence days, a new appraisal system, and the amazing shrinking staff levels are some of the bigger issues we all face.

Here in New England we are in full implementation of the Disability Service Improvement, DSI which began 8/1/06. As you have heard DSI has a number of innovations that will impact and enhance the disability process. Without going into great detail on all of these changes there are two I will briefly discuss; the Quick Disability Decision, QDD, and the Federal Reviewing Official, FEDRO.

The QDD is set up to enable the DDS to make a determination within twenty days. There is software built into the EDCS that will screen each case to determine if the case meets the QDD standards. Once the system identifies the case as QDD special handling is required by the DDS. The QDD software is being referred to as “the wizard”. This invites countless allusions to Kansas and beyond.

The FEDRO replaces the Reconsideration level as the first level of appeal for disability denials. The FEDRO will be located in Falls Church Virginia.

The New England Management Association is a pretty close bunch. We pride ourselves on open communication. Our region is geographically smaller than most other regions so we can have annual meetings that for the majority of participants are a drivable distance, (I’m definitely going to be hearing from Vermont and Maine). We have an excellent working relationship with our Regional Commissioner who makes it a point to attend each of our NESSMA Executive Board meetings.

Our association chooses by a ballot the Regional Office Employee of the year who we honor with a plaque. This RO staff person, manager, or team is cited for going above and beyond the normal requirements of the position to assist field office management do our jobs. The award is highly regarded by both RO staffs and field office management.

This year NESSMA changed the annual meeting from a one day meeting/luncheon to a weekend away extravaganza on beautiful Cape Cod. We were able to secure below market hotel room rates for members and their families. The weekend while not as well attended by membership as the one day meetings of the past was by all accounts a huge success.

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