

Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

“An Oversight Hearing on the Bush Administration’s Plans to Privatize Social Security”

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Chairman Dorgan and members of the Democratic Policy Committee, I respectfully submit this statement regarding the use of Social Security Administration (SSA) resources to promote a political agenda that supports the privatization of Social Security.

I have worked for the Social Security Administration for 31 years. I began as a grade two clerical employee in the Brooklyn Center, Minnesota Office. I was then promoted to a Data Review Technician (DRT), in the Minneapolis, Minnesota District Office and, in 1986, was subsequently promoted to a Title II Claims Representative. As a Claims Representative, I took applications from the public for retirement, survivor and disability benefits. I processed medical and work Continuing Disability Reviews (CDRs), processed work reports as well as answered general inquiries regarding Social Security rules and regulations and their relationship to benefits. The Minneapolis, Minnesota District Office has approximately 75 Social Security employees. It is the 5th largest Social Security field office in the country.

I am currently the Executive Vice President of the National Council of Social Security Field Operations Locals, AFL-CIO, which represents 28,000 Social Security employees in 1,300 field offices and 36 TeleService Centers (800 number sites) across the country. I have been a full time union representative since late 1998. I have maintained direct, daily contact with the employees in my office who serve the public.

In my current position, and as an SSA employee who has served in the Minneapolis office for over 20 years, I am in a unique position to hear employee concerns, from both union and non-union employees, and have a broad understanding of the problems and challenges they face each and every day.

For nearly all of the 31 years that I have worked for the Social Security Administration, career employees have not been asked to become involved in political issues. Over the years, through Republican Administrations and Democratic Administrations, there was one constant: the work of the Social Security Administration should not be politicized. Our job as SSA employees is to serve the public, not to get involved in politics. In fact, we at the Agency know that there are laws on the books that prohibit the use of SSA funds to advocate political positions or to lobby for or against legislative proposals.

Unfortunately, over the last three years, there has been a significant shift in Agency policy and practice on political activity. Today, as part of an Agency-wide, top-down marketing and communications strategy, frontline Agency employees are being instructed to provide the American public with information that is designed to promote the idea that Social Security is in crisis and that Social Security privatization is the answer.

This SSA communications strategy, which was created by the Agency's Office of Communications, provides detailed goals, processes and strategies for using SSA resources to promote privatization. Once adopted at SSA headquarters in Baltimore, the strategy was disseminated to all SSA regional offices for implementation. Each regional office has created its own pro-privatization marketing plan that is either identical to or closely follows the Agency-wide strategy.

Let me walk you through just one of these regional marketing plans, the one that has been implemented by the Kansas City Region, entitled the "Communications/Marketing Tactical Plan." I obtained a copy of this marketing plan directly from the regional SSA Intranet site, which serves as the central online information resource for SSA employees in the region, and which all SSA employees are encouraged to consult for information on a wide range of issues, including how we should communicate with the public about the Social Security program.

This chart shows the front page of the "Public Affairs Resources" section of the Intranet site for the Kansas City Region. You can see there are various links, including one to a document entitled, "2004 Communications Messages on Long-Term Challenges." When you click on this link, you're taken to a set of Talking Points to be used by SSA employees in support of the President's plans to privatize Social Security. As you can see from this chart, one of these Talking Points states, "Modernization *must* include individually controlled, voluntary personal retirement accounts to augment Social Security."

The next chart shows the actual "Communications/Marketing Tactical Plan" for the Kansas City Region. You'll see that as part of the Tactical Plan, under the heading "Tactics," SSA employees are instructed to "Use 'Long-Term Challenges Talking Points' on the PARC to prepare presentations." These are the pro-privatization Talking Points I referred to a moment ago. The "PARC" referred to in this chart is the Regional, SSA-only Intranet site.

As you can see, the "Tactical Plan" also indicates that the both public and the SSA staff are the "Audience" for this marketing message. And that the public's "Stake" in this issue is "The ability of Social Security to pay promised benefits to *current* and future beneficiaries."

The "Tactical Plan" also states that the "Mediums" for this message should include "staff meetings," "Internal communications products" for SSA staff, "Speeches, seminars and

public events,” “Radio, TV, newspapers and SSA publications,” and “Employer and special interest publications.”

The “Tactical Plan” also describes the “Tactics” to be used, including the use of the Talking Points we’ve been discussing, “Discuss solvency issues at staff meetings,” “Deliver message through press releases, presentations at financial planning seminars and public events,” and, interestingly, “Look for ‘non-traditional’ locations ... such as outreach events at farmer’s markets, big box retail stores, etc.”

I believe the use of SSA resources to advocate political positions is wrong and compromises the integrity and credibility of the Social Security Administration. The credibility problem becomes even more acute, when SSA employees are directed to make political statements that are exaggerated or untrue. This undermines the SSA mission to provide clear, accurate, and objective information to the American people about the Social Security system.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today. I will be glad to answer any questions that you may have.