

The **UNITED STATES SENATE**  
**COMMITTEE on FINANCE**  
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**Wyden Statement at Finance Committee Hearing on Social Security During COVID-19**  
*As Prepared for Delivery*

This morning the Finance Committee meets to discuss ways to improve Social Security after a difficult pandemic year. The employees at SSA have worked hard to get payments out on time while undergoing big changes to the way the agency operates. Despite that, the reality is, social distancing and Social Security go together like water and oil.

The Social Security Administration has tens of thousands of employees and 1,500 field offices dotted around the country. Sixteen of those offices and more than 500 employees serve Oregon alone. It takes a lot of hard work to uphold the promise of Social Security, and that work often looks awfully old-school: face-to-face interaction and a lot of paper documents.

SSA closed its field offices when the country went into lockdown. That's because gathering seniors and people with disabilities in confined offices would have been the worst imaginable idea twelve months ago. SSA also needed to protect its own employees. But the fact is, the level of service dipped when SSA's old school approach no longer worked during the pandemic.

Being cut off from face-to-face service is hardest on the people who rely the most on Social Security, including seniors and individuals with very modest incomes who may not have internet access. The number of new applications for certain types of Social Security benefits plummeted during the pandemic. There's an extra layer of difficulty coming between a lot of Americans and Social Security benefits they're eligible to receive.

With fewer employees working in person, work that cannot be handled remotely, such as handling mail or verifying documents, has piled up. SSA's ability to process applications and other important data has slowed. Some Americans have been asked to put their most sensitive personal documents in the mail, including drivers' licenses and birth certificates. That would have been an unattractive prospect to a lot of people even before Louis DeJoy arrived at the Postal Service.

These days, particularly because of the pandemic, the big challenge facing SSA is reaching people who are unable or prefer not to deal with the government online. In the future, SSA could face the opposite challenge.

More people will want to interact with Social Security through a smartphone or a computer, and the face-to-face approach may be less common.

When you talk about changing business as usual at Social Security, it's not just a question of responding to the pandemic. There are big challenges ahead. This committee and the Social Security Administration need to explore new ways of meeting the needs of Americans to provide the benefits they've earned, need and deserve. Making smart improvements to Social Security based on the experience of Covid-19 will pay off in the future in a big way.

All of these issues fall under the far out, revolutionary agenda I like to call "making the government work better." That's never been more important than when you're talking about Social Security. For me, this hard work goes back to my days as the co-director of the Oregon Gray Panthers, which was an advocacy organization for seniors in my home state. In the course of that job I visited with a lot of seniors who were walking an economic tightrope every day, barely able to cover the bills.

Social Security was a life-saver for them. Far too many of today's seniors are still going through that kind of hardship, and it's made even more difficult by a global pandemic and a year of isolation. So this committee must maintain our commitment to upholding the promise of Social Security.

I'm pleased the Committee has this opportunity to discuss improving access to the benefits and services provided by Social Security today. We have an excellent witness panel and I thank them all for their thoughtful testimony. I'll have their introductions shortly.

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