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Contact: Nicole L'Esperance (202) 224-4515

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**Wyden Statement at Finance Committee Hearing to Consider SSA
Commissioner**
As Prepared for Delivery

This morning we are meeting to consider the nomination of Governor Martin O'Malley to be Commissioner of Social Security Administration.

Before we get to Governor O'Malley, I want to welcome our most esteemed former colleague, a Giant of the Senate, and Maryland's Matriarch, Barbara Mikulski. I have known Senator Mikulski for over 20 years, and for our colleagues who did not have the pleasure of serving with her in the Senate: if Barbara is on your side, you're running with the right crowd.

Now to Governor O'Malley. I want to thank you for your willingness to serve in this distinguished role, and a lifetime of public service.

Over his career in public service, Governor O'Malley built a world-class reputation for harnessing technology to deliver transformative change to government services on behalf of Marylanders.

As Mayor of Baltimore, he established the nation's first 311 call center, serving as Baltimoreans' one-stop shop for all City services.

As Governor, he "threw open the doors of government" and created an open web portal allowing all Marylanders to monitor the State's performance in serving the public in real-time.

With a track record like that, I am not surprised the President nominated him to serve, because that is what's sorely needed at the Social Security Administration.

SSA is responsible for administering benefits to over 70 million seniors, people with disabilities, surviving spouses, and other Americans who earned their benefits with every paycheck.

Colleagues, it is no secret that SSA has had its share of difficulties and it's received significant media attention when the agency has fallen short of its mission.

From long lines stretched around field offices, telephone systems crashing, outdated technology and systems, and most concerningly, low staff morale. These criticisms are fair, and I, along with many

members on both sides of the dais, have gone after waste, fraud and abuse to ensure that taxpayer dollars are used wisely and improve customer service.

That said, with the power of the purse and the pen, we in Congress need to take responsibility here as well. SSA's performance—both its successes and failures—is inextricably linked to the tools and resources we provide to the agency.

It is not surprising that customer service performance and staff morale improved as funding levels rose. It is also not surprising that backlogs and wait times grew as funding levels fell.

SSA's budget has been through the ringer over the last decade. Since 2010, SSA's budget has fallen by 17 percent while the number of beneficiaries has risen by 20 percent. In short, the agency has had to do more with less.

Now, I've thrown some numbers at you, but what does this mean outside of Washington? It means seniors who have worked their whole lives and earned these benefits are having to wait in lines around the block to get assistance.

It means parents or grandparents with disabled children are waiting months, if not years, to get a decision on disability benefits.

It means SSA dedicated employees become overworked, burned out, and leave to work elsewhere.

Every member on this dais has talked about how important Social Security is to their constituents, and that we should never cut benefits. I agree.

Every single American who worked their entire lives and paid into Social Security deserves nothing less than platinum-level service. Full stop.

Well, a cut to SSA funding is a cut to benefits. If folks are not able to get a hold of someone at SSA to get assistance, that is in essence a 100 percent cut to their benefits. I hope we can work together to make sure that SSA has sufficient funding to bring the agency into the 21st century.

In addition to the agency's funding woes, SSA is also beholden to the laws Congress passes. Let me give you an example, I have a constituent in Albany, Oregon who receives SSI benefits because of a severe disability and lives in her parents' home. Although she is unable to work because of her disability, she still paid half of her SSI benefit to her parents each month as rent.

However, SSA notified her recently that she owes the government over \$9,000 in overpaid benefits spanning several years because SSA determined she received a rental subsidy from her parents, which is considered income under the Social Security Act.

My office worked with her as she tried to appeal the overpayment, but SSA denied our appeal, stating the law is clear in this case.

This constituent is being punished because her parents lent a helping hand to their child.

To their credit, SSA has made notable strides to streamline and simplify SSI's rules, including those related to housing support would help address my constituent's situation. But SSA is still held back by outdated laws.

I along with many members on this Committee are working to improve these bedrock programs. Senator Brown and Cassidy have championed bipartisan legislation to modernize the SSI program to not only make it easier for beneficiaries to work, save, or marry, but it would simplify the program and reduce overpayments. I am proud to support their legislation and I look forward to working with Senator Crapo and other colleagues on finding a path forward.

I'll close with this: SSA faces an inflection point. It can either continue relying on the policies of yesterday or come into the light and renew itself as the agency it once was. I believe Governor O'Malley is the one who can bring this agency back to its former glory and set it on a path to success.

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