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**Wyden Statement at Finance Committee Hearing to Consider the Nomination of Andrew Saul
to be Commissioner of Social Security**
As Prepared for Delivery

The Finance Committee meets this morning to consider the nomination of Andrew Saul to serve as commissioner of the Social Security Administration. It goes without saying that this position is one of the most important posts in the federal government. It's responsible for administering benefits to over 69 million seniors, people with disabilities, and other Americans who earned their Social Security after working for years and paying into the program with each paycheck.

Mr. Saul's nomination comes before the committee at a critical moment. Middle-class paychecks aren't keeping up with rising living expenses and health care costs, making saving for retirement even harder for many workers. That means Social Security is more important than ever when it comes to guaranteeing all Americans a secure retirement without worrying about financial destitution.

That's especially true for women, who in many circumstances are working multiple jobs while also raising children, sometimes on their own. A recent study showed that women have an average of half the retirement savings as men. That gap means hard times for women in their later years: women aged 65 and older are 80 percent more likely than men to be in poverty.

My parents were divorced when I was young, and to a great extent my mother raised my late brother and I. Despite having a master's degree, she always seemed to take home less pay than men doing the same job. She wasn't alone. That's another reason why it is so important that women get a fair shake when it comes to retirement.

When it comes to the future of Social Security, the program can pay full benefits through 2034 and 79 percent of benefits after 2034. There has been an effort from Trump's top economic advisers on down to portray this as a "crisis" and insist that drastic changes are needed and benefits have to be cut.

Let me be clear colleagues: cuts to Social Security are the exact opposite of what's needed now. Increasing the retirement age, transforming Social Security from a secure defined benefit to a privatized scheme that puts vital benefits at risk, and more -- these harmful ideas will make it harder for seniors and vulnerable Americans to live full lives after years of work. I will go to the mat to prevent these harmful attacks on Social Security. Instead, Congress should focus on ways to improve the program and ensure all Americans can enjoy a secure retirement.

If Mr. Saul is confirmed to a full six-year term next Congress, he will be managing the nuts and bolts of Social Security as this important debate takes place. But there is already work to be done today to ensure Social Security works for Americans who count on its benefits right now.

Today, too many who are seeking benefits are stuck in bureaucratic purgatory -- nearly a million Americans are waiting as Social Security considers appeals of their eligibility. This backlog of disability cases means people often wait more than a year or longer for a decision. That is unacceptable.

Recently Congress has done better when it comes to funding the agency and the backlog has improved. I want to thank Senator Brown and others for pushing hard for these resources in the recent appropriations bills, but it will be important to see results before anybody declares "Mission Accomplished." Too many Americans are waiting for help instead of getting the service they paid for and deserve. The Commissioner should make it very clear - perhaps with a weekly update on the front page of SSA's website - about the average wait time for our constituents.

The Social Security Administration has made great strides to modernize its information technology. Earlier this year the Government Accountability Office said SSA had made the most progress of any agency when it comes to improving and managing its IT.

This is the critical task for every federal agency at a time where data theft is rampant - more vulnerabilities and opportunities for cybercrime are cropping up every day. Americans have made it clear that privacy is paramount, and Social Security can't fall short when it comes to protecting personal information. On a positive note, the agency's Disability Case Processing System has received great reviews from the employees that use the system every day to help people. But to paraphrase President Lincoln, a "bath of public opinion" is needed to verify that it is leading to better service and less waiting.

If confirmed, Mr. Saul will be the first confirmed head of Social Security since 2013. It's a shame there has been such a delay, and that delay has taken its toll. Without a confirmed leader, the agency cannot create and execute a long-term vision of how to improve the program for beneficiaries.

On a more practical level, an acting leader cannot hire qualified people from outside the agency into "Senior Executive Service" positions, such as the person in charge of SSA's IT security or the head of the agency's 1245 field offices. Americans deserve the best talent at the Social Security Administration, and this artificial barrier should be removed as soon as possible.

Before I conclude, I want to address the issue the Chairman raised about taking up only the first nomination. The White House nominated Mr. Saul for two consecutive terms, one for the remainder of the current term ending on January 19, 2019, and one for the succeeding term beginning the next day. If the Finance Committee were to vote on the second nomination, it would be acting during this Congress to fill a vacancy that does not occur until next Congress. That would upend the notion that Senators advise and consent on the contemporaneous nominations of officials that will be running key parts of the federal government. It also would be unprecedented in this committee, and could expose the actions of the Commissioner to legal challenge.

Given these concerns, Chairman Hatch and I have reached an agreement to wait to vote on that future term until next Congress. For my part, if Mr. Saul is confirmed this year, I will support taking up the second nomination without delay in the next Congress. I want to thank Mr. Saul for appearing before the committee today and for his willingness to serve.

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