

The Social Security Rapid Response Collaborative

National Academy of Social Insurance | Center on Budget and Policy Priorities | Urban Institute | AARP

WHAT'S AT STAKE:

Social Security is facing some of its greatest threats in the program's 90-year history. Amidst sweeping cuts and changes led by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), former Social Security Administration (SSA) officials across the political spectrum warn "the administration of the programs Social Security administers is in greater danger than ever before"—and access to critical benefits is at dire risk for millions of older and disabled adults and families.

The Social Security Administration was already experiencing a longstanding customer service crisis following years of underfunding of its operating budget. Now, sweeping cuts are putting the agency and its programs at risk of disruption, payment delays, and data breaches. Recent cuts have resulted in the loss of thousands of agency staff, with another 10,000 positions now at risk of elimination, when the agency was already at a 25-year staffing low.

- Dozens of local field offices are at risk of being shuttered and 6 in 10 regional offices have already been closed;
- Phone service is being curtailed and delays for appointments continue to climb;
- 1-800 number wait times, dropped calls, and callback times are skyrocketing;
- Americans' sensitive data is being mined under the guise of "waste, fraud, and abuse"; and
- An ongoing array of other changes and cuts to customer service are eroding access to vital benefits, causing confusion, anxiety, glitches and outages in SSA's systems, and worse.

Millions of Americans' economic security is at risk. For millions of people, Social Security is the difference between making ends meet and significant hardship. Recent Academy polling found that 42% of Americans 65+ "would not be able to afford the basics, such as food, clothing, or housing [without Social Security]." Delays, interruptions, or cuts would also cause great harm to the more than 11 million Americans with disabilities who rely on Social Security to get by. Modeling by the Urban Institute projects that disruptions to Social Security benefits would leave 6 million beneficiaries unable to cover basic living expenses. And harmful rollbacks of reforms made under the prior administration that helped low-income households are already on the way.

Widespread misinformation risks undermining public confidence in Social Security just as it approaches a long-anticipated funding shortfall. How the public and political leaders perceive the program in the next few years will heavily influence how lawmakers address the program's financing shortfall, projected to occur between 2031-2034. Public attacks by leaders at the highest levels of government continue to sow distrust, including debunked claims about fraud and calling Social Security a "ponzi scheme." And DOGE leaders are rumored to be considering privatizing key agency functions, and even renewed efforts to privatize Social Security itself.

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THE OPPORTUNITY:

Support the Collaborative's work:

Shaping the public debate. In addition to disseminating rapid response analysis to policy, advocacy, and media audiences, ongoing media engagement that centers what's at stake for individuals and families is needed now and in the critical window leading up to solvency negotiations to shape the debate with what Americans actually want on Social Security.

The newly launched **Social Security Speakers Bureau** brings together an array of the nation's leading experts on Social Security, and with strategic messaging support, provides informed experts to press to shape the debate in real-time. Partnership with community partners, direct service providers, and an emerging storybank project will uplift the **stories and voices of beneficiaries**.

Rapid response analysis to highlight the human impact of cuts and changes. Telling the story of who will be impacted by harmful proposals is critical. explainer briefs, blogs, and rapid response social media, informed by quantitative analysis and modeling where possible, is even more urgently needed as recent cuts at SSA risk curtailing availability of public data.

Real-time monitoring of wait times, backlogs, and erosion of benefits access. Tracking the human consequences of customer service cuts and changes is essential. A **performance dashboard** will track 1-800 number waiting times, backlogs, field office closures, and other key metrics. Ongoing nationwide surveys conducted by AARP and research partners will document people's experiences in real-time to put a face on the impact of cuts and changes.

Monitor and advise on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) at SSA. While tech updates are sorely needed at SSA, the people the agency serves must be centered to avoid the erosion of rights and access to benefits. The Academy's Task Force on AI, Emerging Technology, and Disability Benefits will provide a timely source of cross-sector thinking and expertise as AI becomes even more central to the agency's administration of its programs.

Provide vital coordination infrastructure to support key allies and partners. While rapid response coordination and debate-shaping infrastructure exists on other issues such as health care and tax, this kind of collaborative infrastructure is urgently needed on Social Security to provide coordinated thought leadership; disseminate timely research and analysis to advocates, media and policymakers in real-time; and share ongoing updates and message guidance to the larger field and advocacy networks to enable ongoing education, engagement, and mobilization on these issues.

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WHO WE ARE:

Lead Collaborative partners:

The National Academy of Social Insurance has for nearly four decades served as a national leader and convener on social insurance issues and is home to a nonpartisan member network comprised of 1,300 of the nation's leading experts on Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and other social insurance programs. Through the Academy's Social Security Speakers Bureau, it provides leading experts to press to inform and shape the debate in real-time.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities is a nonpartisan research and policy institute that advances federal and state policies to help build a nation where everyone—regardless of income, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, ZIP code, immigration status, or disability status—has the resources they need to thrive and share in the nation's prosperity.

The Urban Institute is a research-to-impact institution founded on one simple idea: To improve lives and strengthen communities, we need practices and policies that work. From advancing well-being to fostering shared prosperity, leaders across sectors are working every day to create brighter futures for all people and communities.

AARP is a nonprofit organization dedicated to advocating for the interests and well-being of people aged 50 and older. With millions of members across the United States, AARP plays a crucial role in influencing public policy, advocating for Social Security, Medicare, and other programs that support older adults. A leader in the aging world, AARP works to empower older Americans, ensuring they have access to the resources needed to live healthier, more financially secure, and engaged lives.

We want to partner with you!

We are grateful to RRF Foundation for Aging and AARP for their partnership and support. For more information on how to partner with or become a supporter of The Social Security Rapid Response Collaborative, **contact Rebecca Vallas, National Academy of Social Insurance, at rvallas@nasi.org or Nikki Drevich, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, at ndrevich@cbpp.org.**

¹ AARP is a proud member of the Collaborative as well as a funding partner, but will not be a recipient of grant funds secured to fund this work.