

# Social Security Advisory Board

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The Honorable Jo Anne B. Barnhart  
Commissioner of Social Security  
Social Security Administration  
6401 Security Boulevard  
Baltimore, Maryland 21235

Dear Commissioner Barnhart:

I am writing on behalf of the Social Security Advisory Board to inform you of our findings with respect to the Social Security Administration's response to the hurricanes that devastated large areas of the South last year. As you know, the Congress, in establishing an independent, bi-partisan Social Security Advisory Board, charged us with a number of responsibilities including "making recommendations with respect to the quality of service that the Administration provides to the public." In discharging this duty, we have not hesitated to point out areas in which the quality of service could be improved. We think, however, that it is equally important to recognize and commend examples of excellence in service.

Shortly after the hurricanes, the Board visited SSA's Dallas region to get a first hand account of the agency's response, and we have supplemented this visit with other inquiries. Based on these studies, we have prepared the attached analysis. As explained more fully in that analysis, we find that the agency and its employees have every reason to be proud of their actions in dealing with that crisis.

Last year's hurricanes caused great suffering for the residents of the impacted areas many of whom experienced displacement from their communities, damage or destruction of their homes and belongings, and, in many cases, loss of family members. For those who depended on income from Social Security or needed to apply for benefits or just needed to have their Social Security numbers verified, those sufferings would have been magnified substantially if the Social Security Administration did not undertake extraordinary efforts to continue providing its services. The agency's success, under those difficult conditions, in

meeting the service needs of those affected by the hurricanes was no accident. It represents the culmination of thoughtful planning and preparedness combined with a workforce imbued with and dedicated to a culture of service. The Board is pleased to send you this report on our findings.

Sincerely,

Hal Daub,  
Chairman

Attachment

## **SSA Response to Hurricanes of 2005**

It has been said that a crisis reveals the true nature of an individual or an organization. In its performance in response to the hurricanes of 2005, the Social Security Administration showed that it and the people of SSA are models of service to the public. As Representative Jim McCrery of Louisiana said, “In spite of the personal trauma caused by these hurricanes, Social Security employees have been hard at work to ensure that eligible evacuees received and will continue to receive their Social Security payments . . . . [Social Security] employees have exemplified excellence in public service—going far beyond the call of duty to serve those in dire need.”

These are some of the elements that made SSA’s response successful: its clear sense of mission, a culture of service, coordination with other agencies, communications, planning and flexibility. Our findings represent the results of a two-day regional field trip by the Social Security Advisory Board to Texas, the headquarters of the Dallas region, which is the office responsible for directing the emergency efforts in Louisiana and Texas. What we learned through that trip has been supplemented by a teleconference with SSA officials in the Atlanta region, who directed the SSA response to the impact of the hurricanes in Mississippi and Florida and numerous other inquiries by our staff.

Providing service delivery in emergency situations is generally difficult, but hurricanes Katrina and Rita presented an especially stressful test of SSA’s preparedness, resourcefulness, and commitment. A wide swath of the South was subjected to damage and destruction. About 600,000 Social Security and 200,000 Supplemental Security Income beneficiaries lived in the counties affected by the hurricanes. The impact was felt over most of the country as evacuees went to other regions and sought services there. The amount of field office walk-in traffic increased dramatically in metro areas across the South, quadrupling in major areas near New Orleans. And the hurricane did not spare SSA personnel and structures. More than 500 employees were dislocated from their homes for some period. Nearly 200 had their homes destroyed or severely damaged. More than 100 local offices were closed for some time, some for weeks. Eleven temporary offices were established to replace damaged facilities or to meet needs created by the hurricanes.

### Sense of mission

Despite the obstacles, SSA responded with a clear sense of mission. While it is not the agency’s formal mission statement, “the right check to the right person, on time,” is a mantra near to the heart of its direct service employees and familiar to everyone throughout the agency. Both Katrina and Rita hit after monthly checks had been issued by the Treasury and were in the hands of the Postal Service. Getting payments to the right people in the wide area damaged by the hurricanes was a challenge. Some people needed to file claims for disability or survivors benefits as a result of the storms. And many evacuees had left home with nothing more than a change of clothes. They needed

SSA to help them provide verification of their Social Security numbers in order to establish their identities for the other services they needed.

### Exceeding expectations

Some numbers tell the basic story of SSA's response. SSA took more than 4,000 claims for benefits as a result of the hurricanes. It issued almost 75,000 immediate payments amounting to \$40 million.

But the numbers do not tell the whole story. SSA's employees responded to the real needs of the people they served. There are numerous stories of employees going the extra mile, and more, to help reunite families who had been separated during the evacuation. For example, employees in Muskogee, Oklahoma used SSA records and assistance from other field offices to reunite a beneficiary with a mental disability with his mother in Houston.

SSA not only issued checks but made sure that people could cash them. The immediate payment checks are not the normal Treasury checks but are third-party drafts drawn on a commercial bank and were often completed by hand. SSA worked with the Chase Manhattan Bank to develop a "Dear Fellow Banker" letter that explained what the checks were, with a space for SSA field employees to insert the name and telephone number of an SSA contact to answer any questions. SSA field management also used its ties to the community to work with local banks.

Many employees worked long hours to meet the challenges they faced. In the interests of space, we will cite some examples from Baton Rouge to stand for the efforts of employees all over the area hit by the hurricanes. Employees from Dallas rode a bus to Baton Rouge to work in offices there. On three separate occasions, they got on a bus at midnight, rode eight hours, and worked past the regular office hours. Then, since closer hotels were full, they got back on the bus and returned to Dallas. Employees in Baton Rouge itself worked all day, closing the office doors at 10:00 p.m., then cleared up paperwork so they could get a few hours of sleep before starting again.

SSA's area director for Louisiana wrote to his employees after the crisis: "You never know how people will react to pressure, but our employees, throughout the area, went way beyond what we could ever have expected of them. I will never forget the day after the flood having New Orleans employees come into the Baton Rouge office and ask how they could help, sit down and begin interviewing, even though they had just lost their homes and were still unable to locate family members."

### Culture of service

In our visits to SSA facilities all over the country over the past several years, we have constantly been impressed by the positive tradition of public service that we found there. While we have pointed out problems with the agency's delivery of services, we have at the same time praised the commitment of its employees. And while it has seemed at times that their "can-do" attitude has flagged under the burdens placed on them, when faced with a crisis, that attitude comes forth and prevails.

In its many visits with agency employees in all components and throughout the Nation, the Board has observed this culture of service. That culture is no accident. It is a tribute not only to SSA's employees but to its management. Since it began, SSA has ensured that this commitment to service is an integral part of its makeup.

### Coordination

SSA demonstrated the importance of good working relationships with the other agencies it relies on to get its job done. The General Services Administration assessed damage to buildings, provided trailers for temporary office space, and leased other space quickly. SSA and the Postal Service established temporary mail delivery stations in areas where mail service was suspended, so that beneficiaries remaining in those areas could pick up their checks at those locations. The Postal Service implemented special procedures to ensure timely delivery of the November checks, and the Treasury Department printed the November checks earlier than usual to give the Postal Service time to implement its special procedures. SSA, along with other agencies, provided services at disaster relief centers set up by the Federal Emergency Management Agency across the affected area. SSA employees also participated in "sweep teams" that visited shelters, nursing homes, and other locations where numbers of evacuees were staying, providing immediate payments, changes of address, Social Security number verification, and benefit applications. The same sorts of activities took place across the country as evacuees arrived and SSA employees met them to provide assistance.

We examined internal coordination and found that support components provided exceptional help to those providing direct service. This may seem like something that should be taken for granted, but it enabled SSA to move more nimbly than some smaller agencies. SSA's Office of Systems responded quickly to needs for communications equipment and to restore and move computer systems and networks and to set them up in temporary locations such as the Houston Astrodome. Finance components ensured that check stock for immediate payments was available. The Office of General Counsel worked with FEMA to obtain release of lists of people who had died in the storms. The Office of Inspector General provided armed law enforcement agents needed to accompany employees into some areas.

### Communications

SSA made efforts to ensure that the public knew what services were available and how to obtain them. Local managers and public affairs specialists worked with local media to let the public know which offices were open, as well as other ways to contact SSA and obtain services. They provided information in English, Spanish, Creole, and Vietnamese. They also made outreach contacts with State and local community agencies to support and provide services to evacuees. Again, they went beyond the expected. The managers of the SSA offices in Gulfport and Moss Point, Mississippi, which were closed because of damage to the buildings, stood in the parking lots of those offices passing out literature on Social Security services and the location of the nearest open office.

### Planning/flexibility

SSA has a continuity-of-operations plan and emergency plans at local levels. It has experience at dealing with disasters, which have been generally more localized. It has dealt with numerous natural disasters and with more unusual events such as the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City; a suspected outbreak of Legionnaire's disease in Richmond, California; and the attacks on September 11, 2001. The agency regularly brings people together to discuss lessons learned after major events and to revise plans based on those lessons learned.

SSA also recognizes that not everything can be foreseen. SSA applied its plans flexibly, moving work to other areas and bringing additional resources to the areas hit by the storms. It established field office support units in larger regional facilities to help with field office workloads. It used its Office of Quality Assurance to help with pending disability decisions. Workloads that could be moved electronically were transferred from closed offices to other offices to minimize delays in processing. SSA extended field office hours and 800-number service hours. Many field offices were open throughout the Labor Day weekend to help evacuees. With the help of GSA, SSA established 11 temporary offices or portable offices to supplement established space. It brought in 171 detailees from offices around the country to help in areas with large numbers of evacuees.

### Lessons learned

The hurricanes reinforced the importance of maintaining a balanced and multi-faceted approach to service delivery. Over the past decades the agency has followed a strategy of offering the public a variety of different ways to interact with it. This not only created significant efficiencies and improved SSA's ability to meet service delivery needs in normal circumstances but also gave it an arsenal of tools to use in crisis situations. Its continuing presence in local communities was an invaluable asset as it relied on its local knowledge in coordinating with community leaders and government institutions. The immediate claims-taking units it had established in its teleservice and processing centers made it possible for many callers needing to file a claim to be routed to someone who could take that claim on the initial call. For claimants who could not be handled in that way, a field office support unit called back to take the claim within 24 hours. A national 800 emergency number enabled employees who had evacuated to report their locations and movement; it also provided office closure information. The hurricane response validated the critical importance of the agency's efforts to anticipate events and to establish continuity of operations plans and emergency plans for its components.

The storms also demonstrated that the agency's commitment to utilizing modern technology not only provides more efficient service, but also will make it better able to respond to unforeseen contingencies. For example, a Louisiana Disability Determination Services (DDS) building in Metairie, Louisiana was severely damaged by the storm. DDS and SSA employees helped movers retrieve 6,000 disability folders, carrying 400 boxes of folders down six flights of unlighted stairs. However, because of the new electronic disability system that the agency has been implementing, there were 1,400 electronic claims pending at that office were simply transferred electronically to

the Shreveport office. About 500 case files were lost in the Office of Hearings and Appeals in Metairie. Once the electronic disability system is fully implemented, losses of that type will not happen.

A difficult lesson that SSA is learning is how expensive it can be to provide service in such circumstances. The storms came at the end of the fiscal year, and the agency showed flexibility in absorbing about \$6 million in costs for personnel, space, and equipment. It faces a greater challenge in the current fiscal year, when it will have to absorb as much as \$50 million in expenses for refurbishing offices, replacing equipment, and relocating employees.

### Conclusion

Even in normal circumstances, the operations of the Social Security Administration directly and crucially affect the lives of millions of Americans. Over the years of the Board's existence, we have been continually impressed by the commitment and expertise of the agency, its management, and its employees at all levels to providing excellent service to the beneficiaries who depend on Social Security. Last year's hurricanes showed that commitment and expertise to be deep and solid. Service is what SSA does. Its employees both in the area and throughout the country volunteered to do whatever was necessary to assure that service to the public in the affected areas would continue. Agency management did not stop to worry about its constrained budgetary circumstances, but immediately deployed the resources necessary to meet the crisis. The agency and its employees, and especially those in the Atlanta and Dallas regions, have every reason to be proud of their preparedness, resourcefulness, and dedication in meeting the needs of the population they serve under the most trying of circumstances.