

The Social Security Administration: A Vision of the Future

The First Steps on the Road to 2020

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Summary

“But if I were to say, my fellow citizens, that we shall send to the moon, 240,000 miles away from the control station in Houston, a giant rocket more than 300 feet tall,.....made of new metal alloys, some of which have not yet been invented, capable of standing heat and stresses several times more than have been experienced, fitted together with a precision better than the finest watch, carrying all the equipment needed for propulsion, guidance, control, communications, food and survival on an untried mission, to an unknown celestial body, and then return it safely to earth.....and do all this and do it right, and do it first before this decade is out—then we must be bold.”

*President John F. Kennedy
September 12, 1962*

In September 1962, when President Kennedy described the vision for a moon landing by the end of the decade, he articulated many of the steps that would have to be taken to achieve that vision-- creation of new metal alloys, the development of new equipment for propulsion, guidance and control, and the construction of a massive rocket capable of propelling man to the moon. His vision expressed not only the ultimate goal but also laid out milestones essential for achieving success. In essence, the first step on the road to realizing a bold future vision is the very act of expressing that vision followed by an ambitious, but realistic, roadmap that springs from the vision statement.

The vision of a moon landing was a powerful motivator for change in the 1960s and provided the inspiration that led to new creative approaches to solving problems, stimulated innovation, and encouraged risk-taking. The Social Security Administration is quite capable of achieving its version of a “moon landing” within the next decade, but the agency cannot reach that goal without a bold vision for what it will look like and how it will get there. SSA, like all of government, is under extraordinary strain to accomplish its core mission with smaller budgets and a smaller workforce. The immediate pressure to attend only to today’s tasks and focus less on the future is understandable, but not acceptable. The Board is convinced that not developing such a longer-range vision is extremely shortsighted and results in planning that is piece-meal, crisis-directed, and ultimately more costly.

In 2010, the Social Security Administration (SSA) commemorated its 75th anniversary, and this celebration afforded the agency the opportunity to reflect on its record of high-quality service to the American public. This anniversary is the right time for envisioning the next generation of Social Security services. A burgeoning workload, shifting social structures, blurring of the setting for when and where work is performed, and an accelerating pace of change all demand that new technologies be harnessed. The business processes currently in use should be carefully analyzed for value added, and reconfigured in new and innovative ways that increase efficiency and accuracy. The public, the business world, and agency employees must all be able to accomplish program interactions at the “flick of a switch” or a simple keystroke. The challenges are immense but not insurmountable.

SSA is currently working on a new strategic plan that will be published later this year. This new plan will describe the goals and companion milestones of mostly short- and mid-range (3 to 5 years) initiatives, many of which are already being rolled out or are in the final stages of development. These initiatives will almost assuredly play instrumental roles in strengthening SSA’s operational foundation, but will they be sufficient to prepare the agency for 2020 and beyond? Only with the future clearly and firmly in mind can the agency focus its resources in the key areas where innovation is sorely needed and discern the essential steps on the road toward 2020.

The purpose of presenting this vision for the Social Security Administration is straightforward. The burgeoning workload, shifting social structures, and an accelerating pace of change demand that the agency embark on an ambitious plan that will equip them for the years ahead. This work must begin now and each strategic element must include clear near and mid-term achievements that will lay the foundation for the longer-term. To ensure success in 2020, they must:

- ✦ Rethink the agency’s service delivery strategy and develop a plan that embraces a broad range of delivery options that meet the public’s expectations.
- ✦ Perform a comprehensive review of program policy to reduce complexity, improve public understanding and maximizes the use of new technology.
- ✦ Establish a Systems Modernization Plan that will move the agency to a modern technology platform and support enhanced service delivery options.
- ✦ Develop a Human Capital Plan that matches workforce competencies, training, and career development with new service delivery strategies and technology changes.
- ✦ Adapt SSA’s organizational structure to maximize the effectiveness of the transformation taking place throughout the agency.

Ultimately, it will be up to the agency to determine which specific initiatives will transform these areas to meet the challenges of the future, or whether initiatives already in place align with a future vision. Regardless, vision, focus and action are urgently needed. To do all that must be done, to do it right and to do it all before this decade is out means that SSA has no choice but to be bold.