Facing the Challenges -- Envisioning the Future

The Social Security Advisory Board believes that SSA has reached a point where continuing to do business using outdated processes and tools hinders the agency's ability to meet the needs and expectations of the American public. With effective planning, however, SSA can set new standards for delivering the kind of service that the public expects. Further, as the agency faces constraints due to current budget and resource issues, planning takes on an even greater importance and urgency.

A comprehensive strategic plan should be the highest priority for this administration. The plan should be long-term, looking out over the next ten years and incorporating a vision for the next decade. It must be bold and describe how the agency will have modernized its services and operations by 2025. Beyond the requirements mandated by the Government Performance Results Act (GPRA), we urge that the agency develop a clear vision for the future that is focused on the integration of new business processes, investment in a modern technology platform, and development of a highly skilled and creative workforce. The planning process should be based on a variety of factors:

- The process should include an assessment of societal factors and probable technological advances that will arise within the next decade. (See the attachment – The Road Ahead.)
- Using that assessment and an in-depth analysis of current service delivery practices, opportunities for change or improvement should be identified and form the basis of the new strategic plan.
- The plan should clearly identify priorities and align available resources accordingly. The implementation of such a plan will inevitably require budget decisions; once those decisions are made they should be supported throughout the agency.
- All agency staff, from the top down, should be expected to participate in and fully embrace the strategic vision contained in the plan and, from the outset, commit themselves to taking the necessary steps to make that plan a reality.

In an effort to provide a more concrete example of the kind of visionary strategic planning we are talking about, the Board released a report entitled, *A Vision of the Future for the Social Security Administration* in March 2011. The report presented a possible vision for SSA in 2020. We hope that you will use the Vision report as a foundation for a new strategic planning process at SSA.

In the Board's view, the "strategic plans" published by the agency since 2000 have not provided the kind of long-range vision of the future called for in the Vision report. We have stated on several occasions our belief that successful strategic planning is an inclusive and

participatory process, with shared ownership throughout an organization that leads to action. But the process should not be prolonged; the plan needs to be developed within a limited timeframe - 6 to 9 months - and then moved into implementation. It should build a common vision that is value-based, externally focused, and based on quality data. Ultimately, there must be a leader – the Commissioner – who has the responsibility to communicate the importance of the plan, i.e. the "true north," the guiding principle, and the basis for all decision making in the organization.

As an example of how a strategic plan can shape a service delivery plan, consider how service is delivered currently. SSA delivers customer service through a network of field offices, teleservice centers and internet options. While there has been a concerted effort to increase internet service delivery, there has not been, until recently, an effort to develop a long range plan for service delivery. Concurrently, the agency has been closing and/or consolidating field offices at least partly due to decreased staffing and budget resources. If service delivery is envisioned as using multiple channels to "meet the changing needs of the public," the plan for the placement of field offices, indeed any SSA facilities, should be proactive, flexible and have the ability to customize services to circumstances such as geographic location, the individuals who live in the service area, and any other contributing factors.

Although many surveys point to a public with increasing access to and desire for electronic service delivery, there will continue to be many persons who expect to interact with Social Security in person or by telephone. But for those who do not use electronic service delivery, what is the best way to deliver service? Several questions arise regarding how services are developed. Are we best serving the public by having someone travel to an office that has limited daytime, weekday only hours and is staffed by employees who may not speak their language? Is service optimal when those employees cannot fully serve the individual because the work must be handed off to another component to be processed? What is the best way to deliver service to the hospitalized patient, to the homeless, to the non-beneficiary members of the public who work during the day? Rather than continuing to embrace the notion that face-to-face interaction is the gold standard of public service, we need to rethink how to **best** meet the needs of differing segments of the American public. Providing multiple service options must be a part of that assessment. It will also be important that the public knows about all the service options they can select and regardless of the option chosen know it will provide the needed service.

If we are to ensure that SSA delivers service that is best suited to our diverse population, then we might envision a future with a mixture of electronic services delivered via personal computers, public kiosks and mobile devices that are supplemented by human contact. Video conferencing and live chatting provide ways to deliver one-on-one service without the need for face-to-face contact. If the future is more personalized service delivered remotely, then today's

plans should be less invested in redesigning field offices, and more on the improved business processes that can be effectively used by a highly-skilled, but dispersed workforce and that are compatible with updated, web-based systems. For the fewer number of claimants without access to electronic delivery, the savings from reducing the field office structure with all the accompanying costs (rent, utilities, guard service, etc.) could enable the agency to deliver services directly e.g., in-person, over the telephone, or via online chat, to those who need it and electronically to those who have that capability.

It is our belief that the agency cannot continue to do business the way it always has, given the increases in workloads coupled with the decreases in resources. Further, short-term solutions such as hiring temporary employees, decreasing training or eliminating the mailing of the Social Security Statements will only create additional problems for SSA.   Poorly trained, short-term employees cannot adequately deliver services and questions the Statement may have answered now become questions for SSA's front-line employees. The challenges that the agency faces today need to be turned into opportunities to rethink the way the agency does business, to envision what is possible, and redirect the present resources in ways that directly support the future workings of the agency. A comprehensive, visionary strategic plan that tackles some of these core issues will enable Congress, the public, and agency employees to "get on board."

The following are factors that we believe a comprehensive, visionary strategic plan must address:

➢ A comprehensive policy review must be conducted to identify changes needed to *simplify and streamline* policy and procedures. After 75 years, many of the policies governing SSA's programs have become overly complex and in some cases unintentionally conflicting, impeding the agency's ability to administer its programs effectively. Some of this stems from legislative action or judicial ruling; much is due to the agency's inability to develop coordinated policy responses. As a result, the public often struggles to understand which benefits they are entitled to receive and grows frustrated by the complexity of the rules used to establish and maintain program eligibility. We realize that many of these changes will require legislative action or regulatory approval as well as close coordination with the Administration and Congress to ensure that appropriate measures are enacted

➢ In order for SSA to deliver high quality service in an effective manner and meet the needs of claimants and beneficiaries, it must undertake an analysis of current business processes to identify non-value added steps and eliminate hand-offs so that work gets done as efficiently as possible. Further, the agency should establish goals that measure success from the customer's perspective, e.g., the timely, accurate resolution of business transactions. This business process analysis should be done in conjunction with both a comprehensive policy review and the design or redesign of processing systems.

➢ The agency should commit to implementing a modern technology platform that will support the agency's mission *and* is sufficiently flexible to support future program changes. Process change has been stymied in the past because the outmoded platform the agency uses has placed constraints on the extent to which SSA could redesign its work and has limited data sharing across components. SSA systems must be able to support internal processes, deliver services to the public online in a way that is secure, and maintain all records accurately. As multi-year funding will be required to modernize the agency's systems, SSA will need to provide a cost benefit analysis and work with Congress in order to finance this effort.

➢ To operate as a high-performing agency, the organizational structure of SSA must be properly aligned with how services are delivered or will be delivered in the future; it must have a sufficiently staffed workforce that possesses the skills and knowledge that are critical for success. The hierarchical structure now in place is a holdover from an era when processing paper claims with limited technology required a large task-specific workforce. We strongly urge SSA to develop a comprehensive restructuring plan that outlines the organization that is required to deliver services in today's environment and in the future.

We know that the volume of work the agency performs has grown and undoubtedly far exceeds what the original structure was designed to handle. Further, today's rapid pace of change is pushing the agency to adjust even more quickly than in the past. Short-term initiatives are not enough and they have diverted the agency's attention away from critical long-term planning. Leadership is necessary to create a long-range vision that lays out a comprehensive roadmap for the agency. The vision must be bold and sufficiently compelling that it transcends changes in administrations and results in a strong case for adequate and stable funding to ensure its implementation. We look forward to the development of such a vision of the future and the achievement of the important strategic goals it will delineate.

The Road Ahead

In developing our Vision report, we identified a number of trends that provide insights into the basic conditions that will likely persist over the next decade. We believe that any effective strategic planning process should take these into account.

- ➢ The demographics of the country are shifting and the population will continue to grow increasingly older and more diverse as society grows increasingly multicultural. The differing cultural values of diverse groups will affect the needs and expectations for service.

- ➢ Technology will become increasingly mobile and will be the primary communication mechanism for conducting business—both personal and public—for a large segment of the population. The proliferation of mobile telecommunications devices has already signaled the progression of this trend—smartphone sales have now surpassed sales of personal computers.

- ➢ Technology will become the primary vehicle for service delivery. With the advent of new technologies, more services will be delivered on demand, in real time, and without the need for human intervention. We are becoming an increasingly "virtual" world.

- ➢ There will be a transformation in the nature of "work" that is a reflection of the emerging electronic world. Virtually all work will be supported by technology in some way; more and more work will be fully automated.

- ➢ The residual work (that which is not fully automated) will require a combination of analytical, communication and technology skills. The workforce of the future will need to be adept at all of these skills.

- ➢ Additionally, changes in the nature of work will require modern systems designs that support and result in more efficient business patterns and workflows.