

Anxiety Mounts Among Social Security Recipients as DOGE Troops Settle In

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ProPublica reports that Elon Musk's team has descended on an already understaffed Social Security Administration, which now faces further workforce cuts and closures of vital local offices. The consequences could be significant for millions of the most vulnerable Americans.

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President Donald Trump was asked at a press conference this month if there were any federal agencies or programs that Elon Musk's newly formed [Department of Government Efficiency](#) wouldn't be allowed to mess with.

"Social Security will not be touched," Trump answered, echoing a promise he [has been making](#) for years. Despite his eagerness to explode treaties, shutter entire government agencies and abandon decades-old ways of doing things, the president understands that Social Security benefits for seniors are sacrosanct.

Still, [as ProPublica reported exclusively Feb. 22](#), the DOGE team landed at the Social Security Administration last week, with Musk drawing attention for his [outlandish claims](#) that large numbers of 150-year-old "[vampires](#)" are receiving Social Security payments. DOGE has begun installing its own operatives, including an engineer linked to [tweets promoting eugenics](#) and executives with a cut-first-fix-later philosophy, in multiple top positions at the Social Security Administration.

Their first wave of actions — initiating the elimination of 41 jobs and the closing of [at least 10 local offices](#), so far — was largely lost in the rush of headlines. Those first steps might seem restrained compared with the mass firings that DOGE has pursued at other federal agencies.

But Social Security recipients rely on in-person service in all 50 states, and the shuttering of offices, reported on DOGE's website to include locations everywhere from rural West Virginia to Las Vegas, could be hugely consequential. The closures potentially reduce access to Social Security for some of the most vulnerable people in this country — including not just retirees but also individuals with severe physical and intellectual disabilities, as well as children whose parents have died and who've been left in poverty.

The Social Security Administration, headquartered just outside Baltimore, has more than 1,200 regional and field offices — nearly a fifth of all of the federal government's offices nationwide. There are [119,000 visitors](#) to these brick-and-mortar facilities every business day. Many of them do not have high levels of computer and internet literacy and need someone to help them through all the legalese of a nearly century-old social program with a wonky user interface.

This is also where elderly people can apply for Medicare, which doesn't have physical outposts of its own. And it's where hearings are held — due process provided — for beneficiaries who believe that they have been unfairly kicked off of desperately needed assistance.

"It's where people access government," said Kathleen Romig, a longtime expert on the program at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities who recently served at the Social Security Administration in a temporary capacity.

In the event of more Social Security office closures like the ones that the Trump administration has begun pursuing — the president is broadly moving to close a range of offices and has even floated the idea of [terminating every single federal lease](#) — it is disproportionately poor people with lower levels of education who will become less likely to apply for and get help, [research on past closures has found](#).

The White House press office did not respond to a request for comment. But in a recent Fox News interview, press secretary Karoline Leavitt criticized "fake news reporters" for "fear-mongering" about Social Security's future under the Trump administration. She said that Musk is only going after fraud and waste in the program.

The roughly 15 million recipients of Supplemental Security Income and Social Security Disability Insurance benefits — many of whom are severely disabled and destitute, or are orphans — are among the least politically powerful people in the U.S.

Many told ProPublica that the distance to their closest Social Security office is already long, and that wait times to get a representative on the phone or a claim or an appeal processed can range from hours to years. Even before Trump was inaugurated, the agency's staffing

levels were at a [50-year low](#) due to a decade of [budget caps](#) and cuts authored by congressional Republicans.

Several SSI and SSDI beneficiaries in rural areas told ProPublica that they have been watching with anxiety as Trump and Musk slash through federal agencies, knowing that any further office or staffing cuts to the Social Security Administration could be catastrophic for them.

Bryan Dooley, a 34-year-old with cerebral palsy who lives outside of Winston Salem, North Carolina, uses a wheelchair and struggles with speaking (he communicated with me through a caretaker). He said that his Social Security benefits, which he receives directly because of his disability and because that disability entitles him to a portion of his late mother's Social Security, were mistakenly cut off several months ago. As he fights to get the assistance turned back on, he has been depleting his savings account trying to pay his mortgage.

"I really want to stay in the house where I lived with my mother," he said. "Otherwise it's a 24-hour care facility for me."

Dooley, who works part time for a nonprofit called Solutions for Independence that helps others with disabilities, said that "we're all watching" the developments at the Social Security Administration. If his local office were to be closed, he noted, he might have to coordinate with a caretaker or family member to take him 100 miles to Raleigh for administrative hearings on his benefits; scheduling appointments, already extremely difficult, would become almost impossible. "It would be a nightmare for all of us," he said.

That nightmare is now on its way to becoming a reality in White Plains, New York, the site of one of the agency's hearing offices on DOGE's list of closures. According to a letter that New York Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand recently sent to the Social Security Administration, the White Plains office, which serves beneficiaries across seven counties, currently has more than 2,000 cases pending.

Starting in May, elderly and disabled people across the region will have to travel up to 135 miles to the next-closest office, which for some of them will be in another state.

"Does the Administration have plans to close additional SSA offices?" Gillibrand asked.

The Social Security Administration declined to respond to a detailed list of questions about DOGE's recent efforts at the agency, including the 10 office closures and staffing reductions. A spokesperson did provide a brief statement on the White Plains situation, saying that the agency had been informed by the General Services Administration that the White Plains office's lease would not be renewed and that there are no plans to replace the

office. Many hearings will take place online through video and audio, the spokesperson said.

DOGE's capture of the Social Security Administration began last week when Trump elevated to acting commissioner a low-level official named Leland Dudek.

In a since-deleted LinkedIn post, Dudek acknowledged that he had been surreptitiously feeding information to DOGE before his promotion. "I confess," he wrote. "I helped DOGE understand SSA. I mailed myself publicly accessible documents and explained them to DOGE... I confess. I bullied agency executives, shared executive contact information, and circumvented the chain of command to connect DOGE with the people who get stuff done." He added: "Everything I have ever done is in service to our country, our beneficiaries, and our agency."

After Dudek was put in charge of the agency, he [told staff](#) that he hoped to reassure them that "our continuing priority is paying beneficiaries the right amount at the right time, and providing other critical services people rely on from us." He also rebutted some of Musk's claims regarding wide scale Social Security fraud.

In a separate meeting, he told Trump administration officials and congressional staffers that one of his new ideas is to "outsource" the jobs of Social Security Administration call center employees, [The Wall Street Journal reported late last week](#).

Still, DOGE has proceeded more carefully with firings and layoffs at the Social Security Administration than it has at other agencies. Whereas aviation safety and nuclear security specialists, veterans affairs staff and firefighters, medical researchers and many others have all been forced out of their jobs by DOGE in recent weeks, it wasn't until Feb. 20 that a much smaller number of recently hired or recently promoted Social Security staff started receiving emails saying that their jobs were not "mission critical."

According to emails shared with ProPublica, these staff members had eight hours to decide if they wanted to request another job within the agency, likely at lower pay and in another city (such a job would not be guaranteed, and relocation expenses would not be covered).

These emails appear to have gone out largely to Social Security Administration policy staff and lawyers, including those who help administrative law judges write decisions in disability cases — decisions that may now take longer and potentially have more errors in them as a result, one agency official told ProPublica.

"Claimants will have adverse effects in terms of delay and also losing benefits that they might otherwise be entitled to," said the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation. Social Security disability cases already have huge backlogs at the

hearing stage, often taking [more than a year](#).

Still, notably, employees “serving the public directly,” like those in field offices, were spared from these layoffs, at least for now.

That said, staff at Social Security’s regional offices around the country were not listed as “mission critical,” reflecting a further misunderstanding on DOGE’s part of what disabled people in particular need from the agency, legal aid attorneys in multiple states told ProPublica.

When a low-income SSI or SSDI recipient has a problem that a front-line rep at a field office can’t explain or fix, or is just too overloaded with cases to deal with, it is regional staff who can help resolve the situation. When a person with an intellectual disability doesn’t understand why their benefits are being cut off or why they haven’t received notices in the mail about their case, regional staff can look through the case file and figure out what to do.

Regional staff do not yet appear to have been affected by DOGE’s layoffs, but many are now feeling on edge. One regional team leader, who also spoke anonymously for fear of retaliation, said that “nobody knows how the RIF [Reduction in Force] is going to work” in the coming days, weeks and months. Offices could be closed at the same time that remote staff are ordered to return to an office, creating a situation in which some SSA employees will face multiple-hour commutes each way every day, all but forcing them to leave their jobs and thus stop serving beneficiaries.

“We think that’s the plan, so that they don’t have to explicitly do as many layoffs” at an agency as popular and heretofore untouchable as the Social Security Administration, said Jessica LaPointe, a council president for the American Federation of Government Employees. LaPointe represents Social Security’s field office and teleservice workers.

That’s not to mention the attrition that could result from the low morale that has been spreading across Social Security Administration employees’ Signal threads and blogs; the agency is already the most overworked and demoralized of nearly any across the federal government, [surveys of federal workers](#) have found.

“And meanwhile the beneficiary ranks just keep exploding,” the regional team leader said. (The number of Social Security recipients has grown by [over 13 million](#) since 2010, as Baby Boomers surge into retirement.)

Even maintaining level staffing, several Social Security experts told ProPublica, would, in population-adjusted terms, amount to a major reduction in the program’s ability to provide benefits and services to its clients.

Martin O'Malley, a Democrat who was commissioner of the Social Security Administration from December 2023 to November 2024 and also previously served as governor of Maryland, told ProPublica that he believes last week marked just the start of what might be a long four years for Social Security. "The American people through a lifetime of work earn not only these benefits but the customer service necessary to process these benefits," he said. "Their money went to that, too."

Trump and Musk "are going to break the largest, most important social program in America," O'Malley predicted — even if they have to do so gradually.

In recent years, the Social Security Administration along with the U.S. Digital Service were working to make it simpler for people with disabilities to apply for Social Security benefits. Officials conducted surveys of poor, elderly and disabled SSI applicants about what would make the process less burdensome, and they then began [creating a simplified application](#) — with plain-language questions and some pre-populated answers — that would eventually be available to complete on paper, by phone or online.

The goal was to reduce the time that applicants spend applying for benefits as well as the time that agency staff spend processing those applications. Or, in other words: government efficiency. Yet these efforts have been slowed now that Trump has [renamed](#) the U.S. Digital Service the U.S. Department of Government Efficiency Service.

"In conversations with regular people about how Social Security could be more efficient, they usually say that they want more staff on the phone lines and taking appointments, and more office locations, so that they don't have to wait 60 days after their spouse or parent died, or wait for months after developing a life-changing disability," said Romig of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. "Right now we're hearing all these generalities about the government being too big, rather than a focus on individual people trying to access services from that government."

Which of these philosophies the Social Security Administration adheres to for the remainder of Trump's time in office will depend in part on which is embraced by Frank Bisignano, Trump's nominee to become the permanent agency commissioner, who will replace Dudek once confirmed by the Senate.

Bisignano's attitude toward Social Security, its staffing, its regional and field offices, and its customer service hasn't yet fully come into focus. He hasn't yet been questioned at a confirmation hearing.

What is known about Bisignano is that he's an experienced finance executive who oversees a \$20 billion company. And that during his time as CEO of Fiserv, the payment-

processing giant, his company generated savings by closing about a hundred locations and terminating thousands of employees, providing them with the opportunity to apply for other roles.
