

‘Just a Mess’: Staff Cuts, Rushed Changes and Anxiety at Social Security

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President Trump promised not to touch Social Security, but as Elon Musk’s DOGE team trims staff and plans cuts to phone services, The New York Times reports the system is groaning under the pressure.

The line started forming outside the Social Security office in suburban Glendale, Ariz., not long after sunrise, dozens of retirees and people with disabilities, shuffling papers, some leaning on walkers, all anxious to know whether President Trump’s government overhaul had put their safety nets at risk.

When 9 a.m. came, an employee emerged from the building with fliers asking the crowd to come back — once they had scheduled an appointment.

“I’ve called for days!” one woman yelled.

“We came from a long ways away,” said another. Still another let everyone know they had been handed a load of bunk, though she used a more colorful term.

[The New York Times reported April 8](#) that with the stock market in turmoil and the economy under threat, beneficiaries might see their monthly Social Security checks as predictable amid the chaos rippling out of Washington. (A subscription may be required to read the entire story.) After all, Mr. Trump has promised not to cut Social Security benefits for the [73 million](#) Americans enrolled.

But that promise has not insulated the Depression-era program once deemed the third rail of American politics. Thousands of worried and frustrated recipients have thronged local field offices, asking why the phone lines are jammed, whether their local offices will be closed by Elon Musk’s team of software engineers and technology executives and whether they will lose their benefits.

Waves of buyouts and early retirements have hobbled the staff at many local offices, and recipients say it has become harder to use the agency's website and phone systems, or even be seen in person.

Those difficulties come as a deadline looms, imposed under the influence of Mr. Musk's cost-cutting initiative called the Department of Government Efficiency as the billionaire presidential adviser crusades against what he imagines to be legions of beneficiaries who do not qualify for Social Security benefits. On April 14, the agency plans to largely phase out phone services for people filing for retirement and survivor benefits or changing their direct deposit information, forcing them to file online or come into the office, part of the administration's broader effort to combat fraud that it has done little to prove exists.

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The Social Security Administration could end up exempting some from the edict, but as April 14 approaches, calls to the agency have risen by 30 percent compared with last year, and more callers are getting busy signals or being disconnected, according to data published by Social Security.

"I didn't know he was going to pull this," said Teresa Boswell, whose vote for Mr. Trump in November helped flip Arizona, but who found herself fuming outside the Social Security office in Glendale last week, unable to sign up for \$1,200 in monthly benefits after she retired from her job processing legal papers. "This is a joke."

According to Liz Huston, a spokeswoman for the White House, "President Trump has made it clear that he is committed to making the federal government more efficient without compromising mission-critical operations. He has promised to protect Social Security, and every recipient will continue to receive their benefits."

The Social Security Administration did not respond to a request for comment from The New York Times.

The problems roiling the Social Security system stem from two of the Trump administration's central obsessions: slashing federal payrolls as quickly as possible and rooting out fraud in the federal government.

About 2,800 Social Security employees have taken buyouts or early retirements promoted by Mr. Musk's group, according to agency data.

Staffing levels at the Social Security Administration were already at 50-year lows, and the departure of so many workers who answered phones and worked at field-office counters has led to longer lines and phone waits, according to interviews with more than a dozen internal field office and high-level employees.

In the small town of Wisconsin Rapids, the field office is losing seven employees, more than half of its 11-person staff.

“They lost a good portion of the people that do the most complicated work,” said Greg Bachinski, an official with the local unit of the federal workers union.

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All told, more than three dozen offices are losing at least a quarter of their employees, with many located in rural areas that supported Mr. Trump, according to the agency.

Further job cuts are likely: The Social Security Administration has said it wants to [shed](#) 7,000 of its 57,000 employees, with the additional cuts coming from headquarters. Mr. Musk’s team is pushing to cut departments that perform key services like technology support by 50 percent or more, according to people familiar with the matter.

At the same time, the intense focus by Mr. Musk’s team on weeding out fraud within Social Security — while top administration officials continue to circulate misinformation about fraud levels — has led to policy announcements that have caused beneficiaries to worry they might lose access to the system or have their benefits cut.

Reducing fraud, particularly involving direct deposits, has long been a focus at the agency, with teams working on minimizing the consequences and costs of scams. But the problems reported have been small in scale compared to the size of the agency and total payments made.

The April 14 requirement for online applications does not apply to people seeking disability benefits, Supplemental Security Income, or Medicare. But many seeking benefits have no clear understanding of what is happening or what is being asked of them.

The White House has grown worried enough about the political fallout from the long lines and wait times that White House officials are pressuring Social Security administrators to reduce the information they put online that could draw attention to problems, according to a person briefed on the discussions.

“Placed on hold for six and a half hours.”

But increasingly, the public knows about the issues. Virender Kanwal, a biology professor in New Jersey, applied for retirement benefits online at the end of February, a few months before her 70th birthday. She said she knew she would have to provide proof of her citizenship to complete the process but did not want to risk mailing in her passport, so she planned to visit a field office. To do so, she needed an appointment, and those need to be secured over the phone.

Ms. Kanwal said she called daily for weeks but never got through. Each time, a recorded message said there was a two-hour wait and to call back later, and the call disconnected. Then she received a letter in late March saying her application would be denied if she did not provide her documents within 12 days.

She began calling every few minutes, and said she was eventually placed on hold for six and a half hours before an agent finally answered just before midnight and gave her an appointment.

“This is not what we expect from our country,” Ms. Kanwal said.

In Poughkeepsie, N.Y., a 90-year-old man using a walker came to a field office because he thought he had to prove he was still alive. In Clinton, S.C., a woman with one leg fell down in the parking lot after coming into the office to show her identification.

In Southern California, older people with disabilities are spending hours taking public buses to get to Social Security offices only to be turned away, nonprofit groups said.

“People just don’t know what’s going to happen,” said Bob Kelley, founder of the San Diego Seniors Foundation. “Everything is up in the air, so it’s just confusion right now.”

Some services offered on the agency’s website have also been crashing more often because a new anti-fraud measure has overloaded the servers, according to employees briefed on the matter.

Many of the people waiting without appointments outside the Glendale office last week trickled away after getting the printout telling them how to schedule an appointment. But Bonnie Baum, 68, a resident of the sprawling 55-and-older community Sun City West, decided to stick it out in the hopes of talking to someone.

She said her application for \$1,800 in monthly retirement benefits had been rejected because she did not file the paperwork on time. She had been unable to reach anyone on the phone, and said she had enough difficulty navigating her smartphone, much less Social Security’s online system.

“It’s just a mess,” she said. Then she sat down and waited.
