

SSA Talks – Episode 1 – New Hiring Initiative Will Improve Service

Narrator: Hello and welcome to SSA Talks. This audio series is an opportunity to hear directly from some of the Social Security Administration’s senior leaders about our top priorities. Thank you for tuning in. Moderating today’s conversation is Jeff Nesbit, our head of Communications.

Jeff Nesbit: Hi, I’m Jeff Nesbit. Today, I’m joined by the leader of the Social Security Administration, Acting Commissioner Kilolo Kijakazi, and Janet Walker, an HR executive, to discuss SSA’s new hiring push. Social Security employees deliver retirement, disability, and survivors’ benefits, as well as Supplemental Security Income payments, for over 70 million people. This number continues to increase, especially as about 10,000 Boomers reach retirement age each day and some will need disability benefits before reaching retirement age. Every day, our employees help people apply for benefits, obtain Social Security Numbers, navigate our online services, manage their benefits, avoid scams, and more. Acting Commissioner Kijakazi, thank you for joining us to help our listeners understand how our hiring push will help us improve service to the public.

Kilolo Kijakazi: My pleasure, Jeff. It’s true, the scope of what we do is enormous. Last year, our employees helped nearly 13 million visitors in our field offices. Staff answered about 69 million phone calls. We completed about 10 million claims for benefits. And we issued about 16 million new or replacement Social Security cards. Congress and the Administration have also asked us to improve access to our programs by conducting outreach to people who may be eligible for benefits. We’re able to provide services to millions of people, year after year, because of our

incredible workforce. I can't overstate the unwavering commitment of our talented and dedicated employees.

Jeff: Many people may think of Social Security as something only for seniors, but SSA programs help people throughout their lives, from birth to retirement. Commissioner, you've made it very clear that SSA's ability to deliver services people deserve and expect depends on our ability to recruit the next generation of diverse and capable public servants. How have you approached hiring as a top and urgent priority for SSA?

Kilolo: Thank you, Jeff. We're focused on hiring because we must improve service. We have many initiatives to improve service, but our service is not where we want it to be largely because we haven't had enough staff to handle increasing workloads.

Jeff: Why doesn't SSA have enough staff?

Kilolo: Simply put, our hiring over the past decade has been limited due to our constrained budgets. At the same time, we gained 8 million new beneficiaries. Even before the pandemic, staff left due to retirement and job changes, and some staff who felt overworked began leaving. Then during the pandemic, we experienced the effects of the Great Resignation that occurred in the larger economy. Last year, we hit our lowest level of employees in 25 years, down to only about 56,000.

Jeff: What about the state disability agencies?

Kilolo: We are also confronting historically high employee losses at the Disability Determination Services, or DDS. These DDSs are State agencies that make disability determinations for the residents, on behalf of SSA. DDS employees are hired by states but funded by SSA. In addition to historic levels of losses, the State DDSs are having difficulty recruiting new employees. As a

result, over one million people are waiting for an answer on their application for disability benefits.

Jeff: Can't technology and automation help?

Kilolo: Well, Jeff, providing additional digital services means we must have enough staffing and resources to maintain them. For people who want to complete their business online or over the phone, we're offering more automated, online, self-service options. We want to make it easier to eliminate visits from our office for people who prefer to go online or use the phone for service. This also allows our employees in field offices to spend more time with people who do not have access to digital services or prefer in-person service. We're using technology to help where we can, but we need enough staff to interview people who come to our offices and to process any necessary changes for people who are receiving benefits. Online can eliminate face-to-face interaction to complete an application, but we still need employees to process the applications that were filed online. And we need staff to answer questions for people calling our 800 number. Hiring across the agency is essential to simplify our business processes and modernize our systems, ensure eligible individuals receive the benefits for which they're entitled, and improve the customer experience overall.

Jeff: So why couldn't SSA hire more people sooner?

Kilolo: We could only hire as many people as our budget allowed. The agency operates within an administrative budget set by Congress each year. To help clarify: Funding for program benefits is based on individuals who are eligible for benefits; we will pay over \$1.3 trillion in benefits this fiscal year. However, the amount we can spend to operate our agency is determined annually by Congress. This year Congress provided SSA an administrative budget of

\$14.1 billion. Each year, Congress can increase or decrease the amount SSA is allowed to spend to operate the agency. At the start of this budget year, Congress provided a funding increase that is enabling us to begin restoring our workforce.

Jeff: Well, that's good news! We have more money to hire. How many people are we looking to hire?

Kilolo: Yes, but it's important to note – while we appreciate the significant increase Congress provided for our operating budget this fiscal year, it's only 55% of the increase the President requested. Most of the funding increase we received covers fixed costs. After covering these fixed costs, we're using all available funding to recruit, hire, and train thousands of new staff, both federal and state employees. We're adding about 4,000 SSA employees, as well as replacing departing staff.

Jeff: Once all these new employees are hired, how soon can people expect to see service improvements?

Kilolo: As you know, our staff conduct highly technical work, and new staff require up to two years to become fully trained. With that said, we'll see some improvements this year compared to last year. This year, we'll complete 50,000 more retirement claims and almost 130,000 more initial disability claims. We'll handle 2 million more phone calls on our National 800 Number. And we'll complete 2 million more Social Security Number card requests.

Jeff: Wow. That's a lot of people we are serving. What about next year?

Kilolo: We expect to see more improvements next year, once our new hires are fully trained and the people who are training them resume their casework full time. To make the kind of

improvements in service that we want to deliver, we need the passage of President Biden's \$15.5 billion request for SSA's administrative expenses next year.

Jeff: Got it. It's not going to happen overnight but we're actively working toward solutions with the resources we have. Besides prioritizing increased funding to hire new staff, what steps have you taken to support hiring and service improvements?

Kilolo: Let me highlight a few things. First, we needed to find and hire qualified applicants more quickly. We obtained special hiring authority from the Office of Personnel Management for most of our positions that directly serve the public. We're using social media, going to job fairs, and getting referrals and resumes from interested applicants through common job application platforms like Handshake and Indeed. So, if you or anyone you know is interested in coming to work with us, let them know – we're hiring and it's easier to apply! We're really focused on recruiting and hiring efficiently. And since we're hiring in over 1,500 local offices, we're centralizing our HR expertise. This is a new office that Janet Walker is leading. We're also improving training for our new hires, so they can quickly apply new skills to help the public. Finally, we continue to collect feedback from our employees. Listening to their feedback has been essential for making improvements.

Jeff: Thank you, Kilolo, for explaining these major steps you've taken. Now, let me turn to Janet Walker, who is leading the new office for centralized HR services to support hiring in our local Social Security offices. Janet, I know you're really excited about this new role, but you're not new to the agency.

Janet Walker: That's right, Jeff. And thank you, Commissioner Kijakazi. I've been a dedicated public servant at SSA for the last 37 years. I have a heart for service, and I know firsthand that

our employees do as well. I've worked in many different places in this agency, but the majority of my career has been in leadership positions that oversee our local Social Security offices, our national 800 number, and other direct service employees. I am always looking for ways to maximize resources to ensure we provide the public with the best service possible.

Jeff: So, you know that more people need Social Security services even though we haven't had the staff to meet the demands.

Janet: Yes, I do, Jeff. That's why it's so important that our new office support the agency's hiring efforts and support all of our employees through meaningful training and engagement – so that they are equipped to meet the needs of customers and beneficiaries. We are reimagining our HR organization by creating a robust central network of highly trained HR professionals to ensure we can recruit, hire, and retain the best SSA employees to provide critical agency services to the American public. Our vision is premier agency-wide HR service model ensuring timely service and policy compliance for the people we serve.

Jeff: What are some of the challenges your office is trying to overcome?

Janet: We're addressing several challenges, Jeff. HR is still recovering from hiring freezes. In other words, many new HR staff hires are still in training. Bringing HR employees together into this new office lets us balance the work and support for all offices. Like other employers across the country, SSA is experiencing challenges with attracting candidates. To help, our office is sharing available agency tools with hiring managers to speed up the selection of qualified candidates. We're supporting recruitment via multiple channels including social media – and this audio series!

Jeff: Now I understand why you agreed to join today's show!

Janet: Absolutely, Jeff. I encourage everyone listening to spread the word – SSA is hiring! We need several thousand new people. There are a lot of different jobs available, entry-level and mid-career. Information is available on ssa.gov/careers. Resumes are being accepted at local offices across the country. So tell anyone who might be interested – we are hiring!

Jeff: So why should people really consider working for SSA?

Janet: Being a public servant matters, and we help millions of people who depend on Social Security programs and benefits. Our employees have the privilege of interacting with members of their local communities everyday – providing support at every stage in life’s journey. We have an opportunity to make a positive difference in people’s lives. We also offer great benefits including paid sick leave and annual leave, work/life programs, pensions, and we provide matching contributions to employee retirement savings accounts. We’re focused on supporting our employees in their career paths, their benefits, and their engagement.

Jeff: Thank you, Janet. Our conversation today will hopefully help our listeners understand everything we’re doing to hire critically needed staff and improve customer service. Any final points you would like to stress? Janet, why don’t you start.

Janet: Everything we do – in every position across the agency – is to serve the millions of people who depend on Social Security services and benefits. I’m excited about the additional hiring we can do this year because it means giving much needed support to our dedicated and hardworking employees and to the public who rely on us. I look forward to the opportunities our new HR office brings to improving service to the public by bringing on new hires and supporting our talented and dedicated HR professionals. I am honored to be part of this great agency and to serve alongside such a committed team!

Kilolo: Thanks so much, Janet, for taking on this new role with great energy and enthusiasm.

We continue to recover from the impacts of the pandemic. Since we resumed in-person service for walk-in customers a year ago, my focus has been to identify and implement improvements. We're already beginning to see some progress. While our staffing fell to just over 56,000 last year, we now have over 57,000 employees. Hiring for our frontline positions means we will have more staff to process claims. This will eventually reduce the average time a person has to wait for a decision on a benefit application. There is a lot of work to be done, including training new hires, but we expect to improve service over the next year. Building an inclusive, engaged, and empowered workforce is an essential part of delivering on our mission to provide critical services to the public. As I visit local offices around the country, I look forward to meeting our new staff members.

Jeff: Thank you, Kilolo and Janet, for joining us today to talk about the agency's hiring initiative. SSA is meeting people where they are - if you want to do business on the computer- we're there; on the phone- we're there; in person- we're there- SSA meets you where you are. To our listeners, we hope you'll tune in again for the next episode in this new audio series, which will look at: Will Social Security Be There When I Retire?