

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Ways and Means
Subcommittee on Social Security

Statement for the Record

Labor-Management Relations at the Social Security Administration

The Honorable James G. Huse, Jr.
Acting Inspector General, Social Security Administration

July 22, 1998

Chairman Bunning and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to appear today to discuss our reviews of official time and Partnership activities at the Social Security Administration (SSA).

In response to a request from this Subcommittee, we reviewed official time and Partnership activities at SSA as a follow up to an earlier General Accounting Office report. Although our interviews with over 100 managers and union representatives were revealing, we encountered a delay in obtaining necessary information.

Initially, the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) advised SSA employees not to cooperate with the reviews. We ultimately received the information when the then-Acting Commissioner of Social Security mediated an end to the impasse. As part of this process, we agreed to make some minor modifications to our survey.

During the reviews, 18 percent of the union representatives we contacted chose not to cooperate, while 100 percent of the managers we contacted did cooperate. The response rate from our survey consisted of 52 percent of the union representatives and 85 percent of the managers, which limits the conclusiveness of the data we received. Because of this, we caution against drawing broad conclusions from the results of our reviews.

We divided our work into four parts: an audit of official time use, two surveys, and an evaluation of Partnership activities. Today, I would like to discuss three of these. I will not be discussing the second survey because it has not yet been released.

We conducted the audit to verify that the official time at SSA for union activities complied with relevant laws, regulations, and collective bargaining agreements. SSA defines official time as "time during which an employee otherwise would be performing Agency-assigned work, but the employee is otherwise authorized by law, regulation, or negotiated agreement to spend time representing union and/or bargaining unit employees." SSA reported that, in FY 1996, 481,945 hours were spent on official time activities. The cost of these activities, including salaries and expenses, totaled \$14.7 million. We could not verify these data because SSA did not have adequate records and controls at that time to ensure that official time was being used in compliance with applicable criteria. Further, the data used to determine the cost of official time were unreliable. We also found indications that SSA's internal controls needed to be strengthened so that

- official time was limited to union representatives,
- the number of authorized union representatives was in compliance with collective bargaining agreement criteria,
- official time was used for appropriate activities and for appropriate amounts of time, and
- all allegations of misuse of official time were resolved.

SSA had recognized many of these issues before our review. As a result, SSA issued new guidance and developed a new automated management information system that will hopefully correct these problems.

We conducted a nation-wide survey of union representatives and managers to collect their observations concerning the use and management of official time for the AFGE's union Council 220 activities. Council 220 represents employees in SSA's field offices and teleservice centers. The responses to our questionnaires indicated the following.

- Although most of the managers and union representatives stated that they recorded official time as required, some union representatives did not always complete an official time form before using official time.
- Almost half of the managers were not informed in writing who represents the union in their office.
- A number of the managers and union representatives we interviewed did not know how many bank hours (the amount of hours authorized for use) were available, which created the potential for exceeding bank time.
- Twenty-five percent of the managers who responded had suspicions or qualms about the abuse of official time.
- Ninety-five percent of the managers responded that they understood where to call with official time issues and that those offices were helpful.

Our evaluation was conducted in response to this Subcommittee's request that we verify SSA's assertions that SSA's Partnership activities had reduced grievance and unfair labor practice filings. We also examined the extent of Partnership activities, how Partnership results are measured, and how time devoted to Partnership activities is tracked. When we began our evaluation, SSA had neither conducted its own evaluation of Partnership nor developed an inventory of its Partnership activities. In July 1997, SSA established the Partnership Evaluation Team to design and conduct an evaluation of SSA's Partnership activities. Because of this, we revised our approach so that we did not duplicate SSA's efforts. Our review found the following.

- The definition of Partnership and related activities was unclear.
- The inventory of Partnership activities was questionable.
- SSA's systems did not provide sufficient data to support a quantitative interpretation of the results or accomplishments from Partnership.

Both SSA and AFGE took exception to the conclusions from our review of Partnership.

In conclusion, based on our recommendations and its earlier actions, SSA has strengthened its procedures and controls to ensure that official time is used appropriately, that allegations of suspected abuse are resolved, and that official time data are complete and accurate. We also

recommended that SSA develop a formal system for identifying Partnership accomplishments and resultant cost savings. Neither SSA nor AFGE agree with this recommendation.