

**The National Council of Social Security Management Associations, Inc.**  
**GREYSTONE GROUP WASHINGTON REPORT**  
**Legislative Report 10-2018**  
**October 1, 2018**

**Hearing Title:** The State of Social Security’s Information Technology

**By:** U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Social Security

**Date:** September 27, 2018

**Link:** <https://waysandmeans.house.gov/event/hearing-on-the-state-of-social-securitys-information-technology/>

**Hearing Background:**

On Thursday, September 27, 2018, the Subcommittee on Social Security held a hearing titled, “The State of Social Security’s Information Technology.” The hearing focused on the Social Security Administration’s information technology, including modernization, management, and acquisitions.

**Members of Congress Attending the Hearing:**

Chairman Sam Johnson (R-TX-3)

Rep. Mike Bishop (R-MI-8)

Rep. Tom Rice (R-SC-7)

Rep. David Schweikert (R-AZ-6)

Rep. Darin LaHood (R-IL-18)

Ranking Member John B. Larson (D-CT-1)

Rep. Linda Sanchez (D-CA-38)

**Subcommittee on Social Security Chairman Sam Johnson (R-TX-3) Opening Statement:**

<https://waysandmeans.house.gov/chairman-johnson-opening-statement-at-hearing-on-the-state-of-social-securitys-information-technology/>

**Subcommittee on Social Security Ranking Member John B. Larson (D-CT-1) Opening Statement:**

<https://larson.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/larson-opening-statement-social-security-subcommittee-hearing-state>

**Witnesses and Their Statements:**

Rajive Mathur

Deputy Commissioner of Systems and Chief Information Officer, Social Security Administration (SSA)

[Testimony](#)

Gale Stallworth Stone

Acting Inspector General, Social Security Administration (SSA)

[Testimony](#)

Carol C. Harris

Director, Information Technology Management Issues, Government Accountability Office (GAO)

[Testimony](#)

### **Summary and Impressions of Hearing:**

This was a relatively brief hearing and in all likelihood the final hearing to be chaired by retiring Subcommittee on Social Security Chairman Sam Johnson (R-TX-3). As such, both the Members of Congress in attendance and the invited witnesses all acknowledged Chairman Johnson's service and upcoming retirement. From this viewer's perspective there were no real surprises in either the prepared testimony or the questions presented by Subcommittee members to the panel. As is most often the case when the topic of SSA's systems projects and expenditures is raised there was quite a bit of discussion related to the Disability Case Processing System (DCPS). There was also a mention of the "Click to Chat" initiative as well, as another example of a less than successful undertaking by SSA.

Deputy Commissioner Mathur focused his comments on the fact that the Social Security Administration's five-year plan is on schedule and on budget. In both his written and oral testimony it was noted that to achieve SSA's IT modernization goals, the agency will invest \$691 million over five years, including the \$280 million that Congress appropriated in FY 2018.

Deputy Commissioner Mathur's written testimony included the following goals from SSA's IT Modernization Plan:

- **Improve Service to the Public** through increasing online services, real-time processing, and having a more service-centric organization, technical structure, and overall better customer experience.
- **Increase the Value of IT for Business** by increasing IT and data reliability, security, and enabling faster claim and post-entitlement decisions.
- **Improve IT Workforce Engagement** by enabling a quicker path to fielding new capabilities, modernizing the development environment to improve productivity, and building a culture to attract new and retain our current top technology talent.
- **Improve Business Workforce Engagement** by enabling better service with enhanced user-centric tools and the ability to move routine work through the systems quickly, enabling our workforce to focus more on the most challenging service needs.
- **Reduce IT and other Operating Costs** through expanding shared services, the cloud, and Commercial Off-The-Shelf (COTS) packages, increasing benefits available through disciplined approaches and reuse of code, and encouraging innovation to improve operational efficiency.
- **Reduce Risk to Continuity of Operations** by increasing awareness of cyber threats and capacity to defend against these threats, and by replacing time-worn systems with maintainable technology.

Deputy Commissioner Mathur's written testimony also included the following information related to SSA's progress and accomplishments that have already been achieved:

#### **Programmatic Applications**

- **SSI Modernization (February, May)** – We eliminated green screens that employees use to document SSI claims information, and replaced them with modern web screens. This also eliminated the COBOL code supporting those screens.
- **Hearings and Appeals Case Management System (June)** – We released the Case Analysis Tool to assist in the development, writing, and decision-making for hearing cases.
- **Insight (March, June, and August)** – Initially developed for use in the Office of Appellate Operations, we subsequently deployed this decisional quality tool to all hearings offices.
- **IMAGEN (August)** – We began testing an application that uses natural language processing and related technologies to extract relevant content from medical evidence of record (MER), which makes it easier

for disability adjudicators to search, filter, and identify the necessary content for adjudicating disability claims.

#### Customer Service Tools

- **Click to Chat (Dec, May)** – We introduced an option for *my Social Security* users to receive help from an employee via live chat.
- **Dynamic Help (May)** – We upgraded to a modern knowledgebase in the cloud; improving our ability to proactively answer online customer questions.
- **Email Us (May)** – We modernized our website’s “Contact Us” feature, which allows customers to submit general questions about SSA’s programs and services.
- **OAO iAppeals (June)** – We provided claimants the ability to electronically file a Request for Review of a hearing decision.
- **myWageReport (January, June)** – We enhanced our online wage reporting application to improve the user experience and allow disabled SSI beneficiaries and their representative payees to use the application.
- **Representative Payee (July)** – We added functionality so that representative payees can submit accounting reports online.
- **Internet Social Security Number Replacement Card (August)** – We continued to expand the availability of our online application for a replacement Social Security card to other States, bringing the total number of States in which its available to 31, plus the District of Columbia.

#### Data/Infrastructure

- **Continuing Death Data Improvement (March, April, May, June, July)** – We added nearly 8 million dates of death to the Death Master File (DMF).
- **Quantum Leap** – We increased the network bandwidth capacity of additional field offices, which increases computer speed and performance. Prior to upgrade, field offices have download speeds between 3 to 10 megabits per second (about as fast as a single iPhone 6 on a 4G network). The upgrade increases the download speed to 100 megabits per second. We expect to upgrade all offices by November 2018.
- **Releases on Time** – Through June, we completed 96 percent of our scheduled releases on time or early.

SSA’s full plan is available at <https://www.ssa.gov/agency/materials/IT-Mod-Plan.pdf>.

Acting Inspector General Stone’s testimony focused on the need for SSA to follow a plan to modernize its IT infrastructure and that continued reliance by the agency on legacy coding and applications is unsustainable in the long term, given SSA’s increasing service and data storage responsibilities. Stone’s testimony indicated that SSA must work toward adopting current, mainstream programming languages, software, and storage capabilities. Stone also referenced the fact that the OIG has long recommended SSA incorporate its IT development strategy into its long-term strategic planning process, so the OIG is encouraged that SSA has developed and implemented its current IT Modernization Plan. Stone’s testimony also noted that as SSA works to reduce its reliance on legacy systems and convert to modern applications and cloud storage, these efforts will take significant management, monitoring, and resources. Acting Inspector General Stone stated that oversight of SSA’s IT planning is a top priority for the OIG and they will continue to track these and related issues.

The testimony presented by Carol C. Harris from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) indicated that while SSA has improved acquisitions and operations, it still needs to fully address the role of the agency's Chief Information Officer (CIO). The following information was included in GAO's testimony:

### **What GAO Found**

The Social Security Administration (SSA) has improved its management of information technology (IT) acquisitions and operations by addressing 14 of the 15 recommendations that GAO has made to the agency. For example,

- **Incremental development.** The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has emphasized the need for agencies to deliver IT investments in smaller increments to reduce risk and deliver capabilities more quickly. In November 2017, GAO reported that agencies, including SSA, needed to improve their certification of incremental development. As a result, GAO recommended that SSA's CIO (1) report incremental development information accurately, and (2) update its incremental development policy and processes. SSA implemented both recommendations.
- **Software licenses.** Effective management of software licenses can help avoid purchasing too many licenses that result in unused software. In May 2014, GAO reported that most agencies, including SSA, lacked comprehensive software license policies. As a result, GAO made six recommendations to SSA, to include developing a comprehensive software licenses policy and inventory. SSA implemented all six recommendations.

However, SSA's IT management policies have not fully addressed the role of its CIO. Various laws and related guidance assign IT management responsibilities to CIOs in six key areas. In August 2018, GAO reported that SSA had fully addressed the role of the CIO in one of the six areas. Specifically, SSA's policies fully addressed the CIO's role in the IT leadership and accountability area by requiring the CIO to report directly to the agency head, among other things.

In contrast, SSA's policies did not address or minimally addressed the IT workforce and IT strategic planning areas. For example, SSA's policies did not include requirements for the CIO to annually assess the extent to which personnel meet IT management skill requirements or to measure how well IT supports agency programs. GAO recommended that SSA address the weaknesses in the remaining five key areas. SSA agreed with GAO's recommendation and stated that the agency plans to implement the recommendation by the end of this month.

During the question and answer portion of the hearing focus was, for the most part, on ensuring that SSA remains on track relative to both the cost and the timeline of the IT Modernization Plan. Members of the Subcommittee repeatedly raised the DCPS project and remaining concerns. They also inquired as to the management of the IT Modernization Plan, including deliverables and accountability for both successes and failures. Blockchain technology and its possible utilization by SSA was also a topic raised by multiple Members of the Subcommittee. Rep. Schweikert (R-AZ-6) pursued perhaps the most technical lines of questions related to blockchain technology and the actual SSA systems themselves including the transition from the legacy systems, whether in-house servers made sense and potential utilization of the cloud. Rep. Tom Rice (R-SC-7) was the Member of the Subcommittee who appeared to be the most concerned, and frankly noticeably frustrated, about SSA's past projects, accountability and the direction of the agency's efforts.

We will continue to monitor the proceedings of the Subcommittee on Social Security and any resulting actions related to this latest hearing. We will keep NCSSMA members updated on any additional developments. Interestingly enough, the topic of SSA's Commissioner was not raised during the hearing.

**Related Articles:**

**Chairman Johnson, American Hero, Gavels Final Hearing as Subcommittee Chair**

<https://waysandmeans.house.gov/chairman-johnson-american-hero-gavels-final-hearing-as-subcommittee-chair/>

**Social Security Administration CIO Needs Stronger Authority, Watchdog says**

<https://www.nextgov.com/cio-briefing/2018/09/social-security-administration-cio-needs-stronger-authority-watchdog-says/151661/>

**Social Security agency needs to empower IT leadership more**

<https://www.federaletimes.com/federal-oversight/watchdogs/2018/09/28/social-security-needs-to-empower-it-leadership-more/>

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Greystone Group LLC  
3303 South Wakefield Street  
Arlington, VA 22206  
202-547-8530  
Contact: Rachel A. Emmons  
E-mail: [rachele@greystone-group.com](mailto:rachele@greystone-group.com)