

U.S. Senate Committee on Finance – NCSSMA Testimony

Earlier this year, NCSSMA had the honor of being invited to provide testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Finance during the hearing titled, “Social Security During COVID: How the Pandemic Hampered Access to Benefits and Strategies for Improving Service Delivery.” While the hearing was publicized in announcements and press releases, webcast by the Committee, and open to view by the public, many activities and actions took place behind the scenes before, during and after the hearing. This issue of the FrontLine blog provided by NCSSMA’s Washington Representative Rachel Emmons is intended to provide NCSSMA members with some sense of what goes on in the background when we are invited to testify during a Congressional hearing.

BEFORE

NCSSMA works hard to establish and maintain our relationships with the Hill. While COVID has certainly shifted the way we meet with the Hill, we have fortunately been able to stay in touch via written communications, regular conference calls and virtual meetings. In large part due to those relationships and the information, the NCSSMA Executive Committee provided to the Senate Finance Committee staff during our “Virtual Capitol Hill Day,” we were invited to provide our front-line perspective of “what is really happening out in the field.”

When the Committee staff first discussed the possibility of a hearing and a potential role for NCSSMA during the proceedings, our assumption was that David would provide testimony as NCSSMA President. Well, things do not always go as planned, and one medical emergency later, Peggy was called back up to testify in David’s stead. The good news is that David has recovered fully, and we had an excellent bench to draw from.

It is certainly exciting being invited to testify before a Congressional Committee, but once the invitation has been accepted there is a LOT of work that takes place. Enough work that it takes a team to prepare for a confident and knowledgeable presentation by one witness on behalf of our entire organization.

Special recognition goes out once again to NCSSMA President David Lescarini, Executive Officer Chris Detzler, and last but certainly not least Immediate Past President Peggy Murphy. All were instrumental in preparing the testimony NCSSMA provided for the official hearing record. Once NCSSMA’s written testimony was finalized and submitted to the Committee there were also discussions with both committee and personal office staff in advance of the hearing. Peggy and David participated in these important pre-hearing discussions and fielded a wide array of questions. This provided an essential opportunity to not only get better acquainted with staff, but also to get a sense of areas of interest and possible questions that could be asked during the hearing.

DURING

No doubt about it, Peggy represented NCSSMA and our members eloquently and passionately during the hearing. She was able to take our 8-page written testimony and distill it down to a 5-minute oral statement focusing on what we hoped would resonate during the proceedings. As Peggy can attest, this is not an easy task. You want to make sure your message is succinct, yet compelling, and every word counts – literally. And unlike the “pre-COVID” days, Peggy and I had to be our own technical crew to coordinate live testimony remotely from Montana to the Senate hearing room. I’ll be honest; there were more than a couple of instances when we were sure flying to DC might have been easier! Webex connections, last minute equipment shifts, broadband consistency, lighting and microphone levels are the new norms for hearing logistics – replacing the previous concerns of getting to Washington, DC, and through building security in time for the hearing.

Peggy not only had to be ready to deliver her prepared remarks, but also to address any questions or comments directed to her by members of the Committee. This is another area where there is a lot that happens behind the scenes that many people are unaware of. You never know which members of the Committee will be at the hearing and what line of questioning they may pursue. There was a great deal of focus during the hearing on the need to provide original documents to SSA through the mail; outreach to vulnerable populations; the need to provide additional in-person appointments; expansion of digital services; and a need to improve/simplify the agency’s applications and forms.

In concluding the hearing, Chairman Ron Wyden (D-OR) requested the following:

1. A detailed plan from SSA to the Committee to address the need to mail original documents. Chairman Wyden requested this plan within two weeks.
2. Additional information from SSA regarding targeted outreach letters, results of the letters, SSA’s actions related to the letters, etc.
3. Simplification of applications/processes: Chairman Wyden requested that over the course of the next month Deputy Commissioner Grace Kim should provide a plan to the Committee regarding simplification.

AFTER

The work doesn’t end when the Chairman adjourns the hearing. In addition to the requests from Chairman Wyden outline above, another important part of the process is the “Questions for the Record” (QFRs). Typically, these are questions the members of the Committee did not have the time and/or opportunity to ask during the hearing. They may also be follow-up to questions asked during the hearing that may require additional explanation or details that were not available at the time of the hearing.

Peggy received a number of QFRs from members of the Committee. Again, this is one of those behind the scenes activities that is critical to the process. Thanks go out again

to David, Chris, Peggy, and also Joe Deaton for their work in compiling responses to questions related to non-portable work; elimination of the Social Security card; staffing and resource levels; safety of both the public and SSA employees; program integrity activities; staff morale; how field office staff have stepped up during the pandemic and other important topics.

Hearings are an essential part of the work that Congress does, and it is important that NCSSMA's front-line perspective is included. It was an honor for NCSSMA to be invited and validation of our long-standing efforts to bring a clear, credible, and valuable perspective on public service and management challenges. We'll continue our Congressional outreach efforts, and you may see us at hearing again in the future – in-person or remotely – we now have experience with both.

Rachel Emmons

NCSSMA Washington Representative