

Washington, DC – Today Congressman Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore), a member of the Committee on Ways and Means, questioned Social Security Administration (SSA) Commissioner Michael Astrue at a hearing on the SSA's disability backlog. The Committee also examined other declines in service to the public resulting from years of underfunding the SSA's administrative expenses.

“Our nation is facing a serious problem with Social Security,” said Congressman Blumenauer. “In Oregon, where the Portland field office ranks among the worst in the nation, people are waiting an average of 705 days for their claims to be processed. This is also a national problem, with Americans waiting an average of 500 days for their disability claims to be processed. Responding to these claims is often a matter of life or death, and it is mind boggling that the Bush administration has hindered the ability of SSA to do its job and protect our citizens. As baby boomers come of age, we need to properly fund the Social Security Administration to fix these backlogs and prevent future breakdowns.”

In recent years, SSA's workload has grown significantly due to the aging of the population and new responsibilities stemming from Medicare and homeland security legislation. Despite a productivity increase of more than 15 percent since 2001, the administrative funding received for SSA has been well below the level needed to keep up with this growing workload. From Fiscal Year (FY) 1998 through FY 2007, SSA received a cumulative total of \$1.3 billion less than was requested by President Bush, and \$4.6 billion less than the Commissioner's own budget for the agency. As a result, by the end of calendar year 2007, SSA staffing had dropped to almost the level in 1972 – before the start of the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program – even though SSA's beneficiary population has nearly doubled since that time.

Due to the combination of rising claims as the baby boom generation ages and prolonged underfunding, Social Security and SSI disability claims backlogs have reached unprecedented levels. The Portland field office ranks 131 out of 145 field offices, and the wait time is 705 days for a claim to be processed.

Across the nation, more than 1.3 million applicants for disability benefits are currently awaiting a decision on their claim, and total waiting times often extend into years. In addition, as SSA tries to address the backlog crisis, the agency is forced to divert its limited resources away from its day-to-day operations in field offices and payment processing centers in order to try to manage the disability backlog. The result is an increase in long lines, delays, busy signals, and unanswered telephones, and growing concern about closures and consolidations of local field offices. Resource shortages have also forced the agency to cut back on program integrity activities, even though such activities have been demonstrated to generate considerable savings to the Trust Fund.

