

U.S. Rep. Moore: Reponse to problems with SSA process for closing field offices

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Today, the Social Security Advisory Board (SSAB) [released a thoughtful report](#) on continuing concerns with the review process the Social Security Administration (SSA) uses for closing field offices and the impacts of those closures on beneficiaries. The SSAB is a bipartisan, independent federal government agency established by Congress to advise the President, Congress, and SSA on matters of policy and administration of SSA programs. In response, Congresswoman Gwen Moore released the following statement:

“Social Security Field Offices and employees provide valuable services to tens of millions of Americans each year. As noted by SSA Commissioner Andrew Saul, ‘Millions of Americans depend on SSA to do our job well, each day, no excuses—because when we don’t, people suffer.’ SSAB’s report highlights the value of these offices and the critical services they provide and some of the harms that result when these offices are closed. The report also notes that, for decades, members of Congress, including myself, have expressed concerns that the SSA’s review process for field office closures occurs often without input from local stakeholders and little transparency. SSA has yet to develop a transparent process. The report reached this conclusion even after SSA instituted a new process in November 2013 that they claimed would “ensure a thorough review and documentation.”

“These field offices provide a valuable service to our communities. We need to protect them and the individuals they serve. Should a closure need to take place, we need a review process that fully considers the harms of proposed closures on communities and works with and involves affected stakeholders and citizens

to **better understand the real world impacts of any such closure.** We need a process that works for the people, not against them.”

In 2018, the SSA closed the Mitchell Street Field Office on Milwaukee’s South Side even though local officials had identified alternative locations to continue services. That closing led Congresswoman Moore to ask the SSAB to look at the impact of such closures on the quality of services provided by the agency and the public’s access to these services.

In addition to finding that the agency’s process for closing offices remains opaque and lacks community engagement, the SSAB determined that closures and other service reductions have increased congestion and wait times at remaining offices. In assessing the impacts of closures, the SSAB found that field office closures tend to hit the most vulnerable the hardest.

Significant findings from [the SSAB report](#):

- “Historically, SSA has relied on and benefited from good relations with the public. SSA undermines that relationship when it closes field offices without giving adequate justification or consulting affected communities.”
- “SSA lacks, or fails to make public, any post-closure evaluation and fails to formally incorporate efforts to mitigate the effects of closures on affected communities.”
- “The impact of field office closures on people with low income and little education is disproportionate as these population groups have particular difficulty learning about a program and proving eligibility.”
- SSA is pushing those seeking help online but “recent surveys raise questions regarding the ability of online services to substitute for face-to-face contact in certain situations.” In fact, the inability to use or access the internet increases the need for face-to-face assistance and many of SSA’s beneficiaries do not use the Internet. For example, the report cites a 2015 survey of SSI recipients that found that only 34 percent use the internet.
- “Field office closures ‘disproportionally discourage’ application for disability benefits, particularly among those who would have received disability benefits had they applied.”

Congresswoman Moore has introduced the Maintain Access to Vital Social Security Services Act (H.R. 2901 in the 116th Congress) that would put in place safeguards to protect the public’s access to the vitally important services provided by the SSA’s

field offices. It outlines a robust public participation process prior to a closure or any actions that would affect service at a field office. That legislation has nearly 30 cosponsors and is pending before the House Ways and Means Committee.