

SSA Talks - Episode 3 - Commissioner O'Malley's Top Priorities for 2024

Narrator: Welcome to *SSA Talks*. Our Agency's new Commissioner, Martin J. O'Malley, was sworn in on December 20, 2023. Since then, he has been very busy meeting with top officials and regional employees about the direction of Social Security going forward. In this episode, Commissioner O'Malley discusses his top priorities with host Jeffrey Buckner, our Acting Deputy Commissioner for Communications.

Jeffrey Buckner, Assistant Deputy Commissioner for the Office of Communications: Welcome, everybody, to our most recent episode of *SSA Talks*. I'm joined today by Commissioner Martin O'Malley. Commissioner, welcome.

Martin O'Malley, Commissioner for the Social Security Administration: Jeff, thank you. Good to be with you.

Jeffrey: It's a pleasure to have you here. This is your first episode of *SSA Talks*. And you have been traveling out and about. And I know that Social Security is near and dear to you, and I wanted to give you an opportunity to talk to America about what it means for you to be Commissioner of Social Security.

Commissioner O'Malley: Well, Jeff, thank you. I think, even though that I know this podcast is called *SSA Talks*, for me it's about SSA listens, and that's what I have to do as Commissioner, is to listen and to learn and to care enough to do something about both the things that our customers tell me, and also, very importantly, which is why I barnstormed all of the regions of the country, even in the winter, in my first 30 days, because I need to hear from employees on the front lines. So, this is an ongoing process of listening, learning, and doing, and that's what

I'm engaged in. And I'm enjoying it every single day. I mean, to be able to work with the men and women of this agency on work that is so important to the lives of so many people across our country. You know, as a Catholic, I told somebody, for me, it's like Corporal Works of Mercy at a grand scale of the nation that people have already earned and already paid for. So I'm excited about the year ahead and wide awake and eyes wide open about the challenges we face.

Jeffrey: And Commissioner, you are a “servant leader.” I have heard you use this term here throughout the agency.

Commissioner O'Malley: Hmm! You were listening!

Jeffrey: I pay attention! And do you mind taking a few moments, if you could share your experience as Mayor of Baltimore, Governor of Maryland, and how that has prepared you for this position as Commissioner and leading an enormous workforce, and as you said, our mission is to serve America. How has that helped prepare you for this?

Commissioner O'Malley: I suppose we all become the products of the people that we have known and that we have loved, and I am certainly the product of the people who I have known and loved in the City of Baltimore through all of their triumphs and joys and through their pains and their losses. And I have had the -- you know, I have probably attended more AME and Baptist services during my years as mayor than I did Catholic services, although I go every Sunday. And this concept of servant leader, to be among and with, not to lord over, not to be on top of some ivory tower barking orders from the top of a triangle or pyramid of command and control; to be among and with. Taylor Branch, who had written the book called *Parting the Waters*, back, I don't know, it's probably 20 years ago now, all about Dr. King and civil rights, he

said to me when I happened to come across him when I was running for Mayor, he said, don't ever separate yourself from the challenges and the sufferings of the people that you're serving because your most important work is not, you know, the work of, you know, your genius, or your operational tricks. It's really to be among and to be with. Transformations, if you will, of the heart. And not to be trite or too metaphysical about it, but you really can't expect to lead people to a better place if you're not among and with the people you're leading and feeling their pain, feeling, in the case of SSA, their disappointment, their exhaustion, their overwork, their under appreciation, their sense that people in headquarters don't listen, and when they send us new systems they make our lives and our jobs harder to do for the people that we serve. So, to be a servant leader is to acknowledge that, to own it, and to do what you can to address it and to fix it every day.

Jeffrey: Thank you, Commissioner. So, tying back to why we're here, serving America, the challenges that they face, and you talked about the challenges that our own employees face, would you share with us your top priorities for our listeners?

Commissioner O'Malley: Yeah, sure. I think it's pretty, I mean, and you hear this whether you're listening to our customers, or you are listening to our workers on the front lines talking to our customers. I mean, we're in a customer service crisis right now. It is not normal. It's not acceptable. And it's not right the people who have worked their whole lives to earn benefits should have to wait for 44 minutes, for an hour or more, in order to have their question answered. It's not right that 10,000 people a year die waiting for their disability determinations to be made, and it's not right that we should have situations where we, through no fault of the recipient, find ourselves in the situation of overpayments and recovering dollars that actually

put people out of their homes and inflict enormous hardship on, as you know, seniors. Half of our seniors who are out there live entirely on Social Security. So, anyway, the bottom line is, look, our top customer service priorities for the year are to reduce the call times on the 800 number; to reduce the time to the determination of disabilities, both the initials and the appeals; and finally, to address the injustice we do to people because of overpayments and underpayments that were not their fault. Those are our top priorities. And how we do that will be a hundred or a thousand different ways if we continue to call the huddles, you know, run plays, measure yardage, and make those situations better, not once a year, but every day, every two weeks.

Jeffrey: And, Commissioner, let's talk about the two weeks. So the priorities that you just laid out for everybody, these aren't talking points alone. These aren't just bullets on a page. These are actionable issues that the agency needs to address. And you've implemented a process with this two-week cadence that you just referred to and it's called "SecurityStat." Would you tell us a bit about that?

Commissioner O'Malley: At the risk of going too much ship-in-the-bottle, it had, what I learned as mayor and what I learned as governor and what I was able to do with dedicated people around me in both of those situations, was to break us out of the notion that government is something we do annually at the budget process. We set a goal to make things better by next year's budget and everything's inputs, inputs, inputs, usually of money, and rarely do we look at what is going to be the output for the people we serve every two weeks. The good news about our agency is, man, we collect a lot of data. We have a lot of measures of, you know, work years, workflows, you know, FO 1, FO 2 processing times. We measure a lot of stuff. In the past,

though, we have usually measured it, understandably, from the ground up in distinct silos of the operation, but rarely do we get them to the center of the organization where the various deputy commissioners, head of the office of, you know, legal counsel, head of policy, head of operations, head of I.T., can look at that latest emerging reality of how we're doing, what we're doing, and start to ask the questions that take us to what's the root cause of that problem.

What percentage of that problem, in this case I'm talking about the 800 number, are people that are being driven to the 800 number because the notices we send out are gibberish and nobody can make sense of them. So, those are the things we unpack every -- on a two-week cadence in SecurityStat. It's arranged in a somewhat, you know, in a more collaborative fashion than sort of the long *Addams Family* and conference tables that are the norm in this agency. Instead, we're all facing one another. We all know we're going to be there, at the most, in two weeks. And when you consider the fact that we have a regular rotating focus of eight different topics every two weeks, you know, oftentimes we see each other there, and four different after iterations every single week in terms of people like myself, or Dustin Brown, Carolyn Colvin, our head of I.T., head of budget. So SecurityStat is nothing less than the latest evolution of how this agency uses the latest data and technology to better serve customers. But we're doing it at a time when, through no fault of the men and women of this agency, Congress has restricted our funding to a point where we have the fewest number of employees that we've had in 20 or 30 years, while also having a rising number of beneficiaries. But, as in most things in life, it's not about just convincing Congress to give us more funding or just improving our own operations and effectiveness. It's a both/and situation. We have to do both. And so, that's what SecurityStat is about. Some of the problems we uncover, some of the solution sets we bring

forward -- and usually it's not just one component, it's usually three components that have to do three different things in order to remove any one barrier. Some of those are just base singles. But you know what, Jeff? If you put enough people on base, you start scoring home runs, you start driving in runs. And so, that's what we're doing. A lot of bunt singles, a lot of things that we might look at as, well, that's just an incremental change. But across the scale of that, this agency, that can result in a lot of, you know, a lot of saved hours, a lot of efficiencies that can also reduce the demoralization that our overworked employees are experiencing when they see that, ah, somebody finally listened. They're not making me do this sort of rote idiot work 39 times on an SSI application to say, no, I don't have money. No, I don't have a checking account. No, I don't have a savings account. Instead, it's a "No to All" button. You might think that's not a big deal. It's just a "No to All" button. But, if you're somebody that has to do that mindless work every day, and it takes you from the more human work of serving a person, you know, it's a little thing. But to know that headquarters is again listening and acting and acting on a two-week cadence is important. And that's -- I think there's a lot of promise in this SecurityStat process because this agency, unlike the last two big organizations I led, the City of Baltimore or the State of Maryland, this agency already has an 88-year proud history of collecting a lot of data. Now, we need to act on it in a more timely way. And we can. And we will. And we are.

Jeffrey: This is fantastic. And these ideas, these improvements that you're talking about, Commissioner, these are coming from employees?

Commissioner O'Malley: All the best ideas, Jeff, in my experience always come from the people that are already doing the work. The problem is, in most organizations, we so over-schedule

leaders in the center of these big organizations to give speeches, to go do this, go do that, sit in headquarters and receive ten more one-hour briefings, that we create a disconnection between the people that have the authority to do something about the challenges out in the field with customers and, you know, the workers that are seeing the inefficiencies, that are seeing how we can do better. So, we're on a constant mission here to learn, to gather from people, our employees who are serving customers, the things we can do right away to improve customer service and outcomes for people, to reduce overpayments, to reduce the call time, the wait time on the 800-number, to speed accurate determinations of disability.

Jeffrey: This is great, and these all add up. You used the term base hits, Commissioner. So not all of these necessarily are going to have the biggest impact in one swing, right, using that home run analogy. But these matter, these add up. Some of these are going to be immediately realized by our customers who depend on us. Some of them help our employees, but they -- but helping our employees helps the public.

Commissioner O'Malley: It all, they all go together. I mean, you cannot, even the, you know, people that have degrees in customer-centered design and, you know, customer experience -- I laugh only because it becomes a little more wonky than it needs to be. The common sense is, you are not going to have satisfied customers if you have miserable and overworked employees. And they both go together where it's part of, it's part, and it's all part of the same system. We're a big human resource organization that is serving another large human resource called the United States of America; we, the people. In order to do better by our customers, we also have to listen more and do better by our employees. And when I say we, I don't mean exclusively people inside this headquarters building, that we have an enormous responsibility

that we need to live up to, too. But Congress needs to live up to its responsibility. We operate on a little less this year than 1% of what our annual benefits are that we pay out. So, we pay out about 1.4 trillion in benefits. And we do all of that with an administrative overhead of less than 1%. You won't find another insurance company in the United States of America, and this is social insurance, different, but you won't find another insurance company in America that has that ratio of just 1% overhead to the benefits that they pay out. And that's even before you get to the notion of how we account for all of the, you know, premiums, if you will, that are being paid in by people's FICA.

Jeffrey: And, Commissioner, I know you're looking forward to coming back, joining us again for future episodes of SSA Talks. Any final thought you'd like to share with our listeners today?

Commissioner O'Malley: Sure. I guess the final thought is this, Jeff, that the Social Security for 88 years of its history has really done, for the most part, a remarkable job of getting the right amount to the right person at the right time. I mean, if you've gone on ssa.gov, set up your own account, it is amazing that this organization has kept track of all of those little percentages that have come out of our paychecks since we were little kids in order to calculate what our benefit will be when we reach retirement, or God forbid should we become so disabled that we cannot work. So that's a proud history. It's an important mission. It is the most important work I think that we do in the continental United States. And I'm just honored to be able to be a part of that and to be able to better serve the men and women who are on the front lines serving our customers. These are going to be really, really important months these months ahead. Some of the things we do will be incremental. Some of them will be bold. Ultimately, the sum total of

those things, I believe, will be transformational. And I hope our employees hang in there because night is darkest just before the dawn.

Jeffrey: Commissioner, thank you for joining me today for sharing your thoughts and priorities.

And we look forward to having you back to talk about some of our successes to come.

Commissioner O'Malley: Awesome. Jeff, thanks very, very much.

Narrator: Thank you for listening to *SSA Talks*. Please subscribe to learn when each new episode is released. We also invite you to visit our Communications Corner to stay updated on Social Security's top initiatives. Head over to ssa.gov/news to learn more.

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