

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

February 2, 2012

Susan Harding  
Regional Director, New England  
Social Security Administration, Regional Office  
John F. Kennedy Federal Building, 19th Floor  
Boston, MA 02203

Dear Director Harding:

Thank you for taking the time to participate in the telephone conference with Commissioner Astrue and us last Friday, January 27, 2012. We received your letter in response to our several requests for information. After careful review, we continue to have serious concerns about the closing of the Norwalk Social Security field office and strongly urge you to reconsider your decision.

**PROCEDURE**

Your letter states that, due to the fiscal climate, you are forced to consolidate when a “reasonable opportunity is presented.” We strongly disagree that the expiration of a lease creates a “reasonable opportunity.” Commissioner Astrue stated on the teleconference, “When a lease expires, Social Security consolidates.” Although we agree that cost-saving measures and reductions are necessary, we strongly believe a more logical and data-driven process should be used to determine which Social Security field offices will be consolidated. According to a November 2010 report issued by your Administration, *The Social Security Administration’s Facilities Management A-13-11-21110*, and reports by your staff, as recently as six months ago, the SSA was implementing a plan that would expand the Norwalk SSA office by 19% and the Bridgeport office by 42%. This would seem to make the expiration of the Norwalk office lease immaterial to your decision-making process.

In addition to the logical problems associated with closing an office simply because a lease expires, a report we obtained this week from GSA reveals that this policy, if in effect, is not consistently enforced. Leases for seven Social Security offices in Massachusetts expired in 2011, and every single lease was re-signed. Three of those leases were signed within the last 90 days, and two of those were in the immediate Boston area. We also discovered that eight leases will be expiring in Massachusetts in 2012. Not one of these 15 expiring leases is on your list of offices slated for closure. Commissioner Astrue commented that there are “commitments” made previously and that some of the lease agreements in the Boston area are “complicated.” **We strongly urge you to consider your commitment to the people of the Norwalk service area.**

**BUDGET**

We recognize the need for federal agencies to reduce spending during these challenging fiscal times. It has become clear to us that closure of other SSA offices within the region would have generated a higher cost savings of at least \$42 thousand or more annually. During our conference call, you indicated that office closures were also taking place in Massachusetts. To be more specific, you advised that the SSA offices located in Greenfield and Waltham, Massachusetts, were being closed and that you were also looking at the office located in North Adams, Massachusetts. However, the data our offices received does not list any Massachusetts office closures. The data further indicates that both the Greenfield and Waltham, Massachusetts, offices have received new leases until 2021. The data also

shows both the Greenfield and North Adams offices have lower average weekly visits than the Norwalk office. The projected costs savings for leases on these two Massachusetts offices would have generated SSA a yearly savings of \$191,174.45, which is approximately \$42,191.95 more in savings compared to the current Norwalk lease.

In addition, SSA cited staff savings as a benefit of consolidating the Norwalk office. However, it is our understanding that this does not accurately reflect the Bridgeport district staffing. In fact, there has been little, if any, staff loss in the Norwalk, Danbury, Bridgeport, or Stamford offices. Furthermore, all employees in the Norwalk office will be relocated to other offices in the Bridgeport region, meaning that the SSA will not benefit from any savings due to personnel reduction resulting from the Norwalk office's closure. Additionally, we expect that the extra costs incurred to rent a larger office in Bridgeport, which is necessary to accommodate clients no longer served in Norwalk, will negate most of the saving achieved by eliminating rental payments in Norwalk. This is especially true given the over-abundance of low-cost, high quality commercial rental space currently available in Norwalk. Subtracting staff and rental costs from the savings you initially estimated, the cost of security for one office remains the only valid remaining additional expense you cited.

## **ACCESSIBILITY**

SSA has stated that most of the Administration's services are accessed by computer or phone. According to your own data, this is false. Less than one-third of Title II claims—disability, spouse, and Medicare claims—were submitted online. We conclude from this data that almost 70% of Title II claimants had direct contact with the Bridgeport district field offices, and nearly half of the initial claims processed by the Norwalk office were completed in person. We noticed that, while you provided information on Title II claims, you neglected to provide corresponding data for Title XVI claims, the claims for supplemental income. These claims are made either by or on behalf of our most vulnerable citizens, the disabled and blind, including children. It is very likely that these individuals account for many of the over 300 constituents who personally visit the Norwalk field office weekly for services.

By closing the Norwalk office, the average distance between the field offices in the Bridgeport region will be 25 miles. This is far in excess of the distance between offices in other areas. The data you presented to us shows, for example, that Boston's four offices are located within three miles of each other. Just outside of Boston are an additional seven offices for a total of 11 offices in the immediate Boston area.

You offered to supply the Norwalk Senior Center with video conference equipment in an effort to assist clients who are unable to travel to another office; we believe this is an inadequate solution. On Friday's call, Commissioner Astrue described to us the growing threat to the safety of Social Security employees and his concern with sending SSA staff into the field without protection. We share your concerns for the safety of SSA staff, but we are concerned that the video conference centers may not provide adequate security for the sensitive medical and financial information being disclosed at these centers. We also do not believe this will be a service that can be utilized by many of our seniors and disabled constituents who may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable with this type of technology.

**We have concluded that the cost-savings you expect to gain from the Norwalk office closure do not compare to savings that could be made elsewhere in the region. This office closure would severely jeopardize the services and benefits guaranteed by law to our most vulnerable citizens. We again strongly urge you to suspend closure of the Norwalk office.**

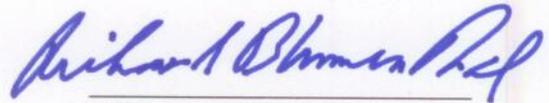
It is our understanding that GSA and the City of Norwalk have identified several properties to which the Norwalk field office could relocate for considerably less rent. We stand willing to arrange further meetings between SSA, GSA, and the City of Norwalk, or to otherwise offer assistance, to ensure that a local Social Security presence remains in Norwalk to assist senior and disabled residents.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter. We look forward to your prompt response.

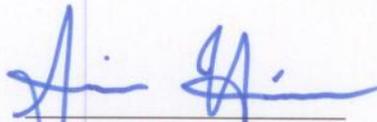
Sincerely,



JOSEPH I. LIEBERMAN  
United States Senate



RICHARD BLUMENTHAL  
United States Senate



JAMES A. HIMES  
Member of Congress