

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 10, 2025

Frank Bisignano
Commissioner
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21235

Dear Mr. Bisignano,

We write with serious concerns that reported attempts by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) to hastily upgrade existing Social Security IT infrastructure will result in major disruptions to the delivery of critical benefits and mass data losses—including the wage histories of every working American. While the ultimate goal of upgrading the digital infrastructure at the Social Security Administration (SSA) is a worthy one, it is essential that appropriate testing and safeguards are put in place to ensure that hurried and untested changes don't interrupt service or erase critical data necessary to ensure that Americans can access the benefits they have paid into their whole working lives.

The SSA is already undertaking an IT modernization plan that was updated just last year,¹ and that plan should not be circumvented by DOGE staffers who have no experience or training with the legacy COBOL systems that form the technological backbone of the Social Security program. But in recent months, news reports have suggested that DOGE is leading a major overhaul of the SSA's digital infrastructure.² DOGE has allegedly demanded this massive technological project take place in the span of just a few months, a timeframe so short that one former government technologist described it as equivalent to "cooking a Thanksgiving turkey in 20 minutes by putting it in a blast furnace, or choosing to get measles instead of getting vaccinated."³ This rushed job threatens the loss of critical data during the transition, security vulnerabilities that potential hackers can exploit, and major disruptions in the delivery of benefits⁴ that nearly 70 million Americans rely on.⁵

Experts described the risk of a botched and rushed DOGE effort to overhaul Social Security's software backbone:

¹ Social Security Administration, "Digital Modernization Strategy – Narrative 2024," February 2025, <https://www.ssa.gov/open/materials/DMS-narrative-2024.pdf>.

² WIRED, "DOGE Plans to Rebuild SSA Code Base in Months, Risking Benefits and System Collapse," Makena Kelly, March 28, 2025, <https://www.wired.com/story/doge-rebuild-social-security-administration-cobol-benefits/>.

³ MSNBC, "DOGE's new plan to overhaul the Social Security Administration is doomed to fail," Waldo Jaquith, April 1, 2025, <https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/msnbc-opinion/doge-social-security-plan-fail-code-rcna198866>.

⁴ Letter from New York Legal Assistance Group to SSA Acting Commissioner Leland Dudek, April 23, 2025 (on file with Senator Warren's staff.)

⁵ Social Security Administration, "Fact Sheet: Social Security," 2025, <https://www.ssa.gov/news/press/factsheets/basicfact-alt.pdf>.

The software that drives the SSA is the most critical part of that infrastructure. ... if the SSA's specialized software doesn't work, the agency is dead in the water. ... if just one person misses a Social Security payment, that could drop the person off a financial cliff. Replacing the SSA's core infrastructure with an entirely new system all at once is performing a high-wire act without a net, only it's not DOGE staffers who risk falling — it's the Social Security beneficiaries who depend on that social safety net. ... either the DOGE programmers are so inexperienced and cocksure that they think this can actually work, or this is a cover for doing serious damage to the Social Security system. ... DOGE's effort is likely to fail and threatens to bring down Social Security along with it.⁶

Even before embarking on this reckless plan, DOGE's "hostile takeover" of the SSA has led to service problems that have prevented Americans from accessing the benefits they are owed.⁷ In February, DOGE announced plans to slash the SSA workforce by 7,000, 78% of whom work in frontline customer service roles. Amid these broader cuts to the SSA workforce, DOGE has also taken aim at the Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO)—the department responsible for protecting Americans' most sensitive information, maintaining the agency's benefit claims processing systems, and managing the SSA's website and the online portal used by Social Security enrollees. The SSA announced these cuts even after its website crashed four times in 10 days in March, preventing beneficiaries from accessing their online accounts.⁸ Put simply, DOGE has already limited access to benefits by damaging SSA's technological infrastructure—and this rushed IT modernization plan can only exacerbate those problems.

DOGE has little credibility left when it comes to technology and program changes at the Social Security Administration. Elon Musk has called Social Security "the biggest Ponzi scheme of all time," and at his direction, the SSA rolled out a series of anti-fraud measures that have been revealed to be based on falsehoods—less than two potential instances of fraud were found out of 110,000 cases.⁹ But while these DOGE measures sought to root out nonexistent fraud, they instead caused major service disruptions for everyday Americans who rely on their Social Security benefits. The changes to the SSA's telephone policies slowed benefits claims processing by 25 percent,¹⁰ putting many SSA enrollees even closer to the financial brink.

This was not the only dangerous mistake by DOGE at the Social Security Administration. Elon Musk and his DOGE staffers betrayed their ignorance of the basic workings of the SSA system when they falsely claimed that tens of millions of people over 100 years old were receiving benefits, when in fact those entries simply represented people without a date of death in their record.¹¹ And DOGE has been tampering with the critical Death Master File in order to encourage immigrants to "self-deport," destroying confidence in the integrity of data that

⁶ MSNBC, "DOGE's new plan to overhaul the Social Security Administration is doomed to fail," Waldo Jaquith, April 1, 2025, <https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/msnbc-opinion/doge-social-security-plan-fail-code-rcna198866>.

⁷ Washington Post, "Long waits, waves of calls, website crashes: Social Security is breaking down," Lisa Rein and Hannah Natanson, March 25, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/03/25/social-security-phones-doge-cuts/>.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Senator Elizabeth Warren, "New Social Security Data Reveals Musk, DOGE Lied in Claims of Social Security Fraud," press release, May 15, 2025, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/new-social-security-data-reveals-musk-doge-lied-in-claims-of-social-security-fraud>.

¹⁰ *Id.*

numerous federal and state agencies rely on.¹² Even though Elon Musk has at least officially departed DOGE,¹³ its staffers remain embedded at the SSA with the ability to continue harming this critical program.

This new DOGE-ordered plan to hastily modernize the SSA's IT systems falls into the same pattern: damaging and degrading the SSA in the name of "efficiency." The transformation of a system as complex as the SSA's is a difficult and time-consuming process that requires technical expertise, institutional knowledge, and adequate funding and staffing to execute properly. According to the 2016 testimony by the SSA Office of the Inspector General, there are more than 60 million lines of code in COBOL, and millions more in other programming languages, that translate complex legal and regulatory frameworks into a functioning payments system.¹⁴ These systems have been built up over time, and the languages and data structures used are often no longer even taught.¹⁵ In order to carry out this complicated upgrade effort, SSA will have to "[r]ebuild the plane while it is flying," and ensure that payments continue to go out seamlessly while simultaneously building and transitioning the new system.¹⁶

This would be a difficult task under the most ideal circumstances, like adequate funding and a deep well of institutional knowledge to work from. Trying to carry it out with staffers who fundamentally misunderstand the mission of the agency and the technology that runs it—while firing the most knowledgeable workers—is a recipe for disaster.

If this complex project is mismanaged, disaster could ensue. Essential data may be permanently lost in ways that preclude the SSA from accurately calculating and delivering benefit payments.¹⁷ This could cause irreparable damage to the system, as wage and other data is housed internally at SSA and cannot be adequately replicated by data from other agencies like the IRS.¹⁸ Wiping out the history of all taxpaying Americans would effectively preclude SSA from providing benefits. Beyond Social Security, many states rely on this SSA data to administer programs like Medicaid

¹¹ Associated Press, "Tens of millions of dead people aren't getting Social Security checks, despite Trump and Musk claims," Fatima Hussein, February 19, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/social-security-payments-deceased-false-claims-doge-ed2885f5769f368853ac3615b4852cf7>.

¹² New York Times, "Social Security Lists Thousands of Migrants as Dead to Prompt Them to 'Self-Deport,'" Alexandra Berzon et al., April 10, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/10/us/politics/migrants-deport-social-security-doge.html>.

¹³ NPR, "Elon Musk is leaving the federal government. What's next for DOGE?" Stephen Fowler, <https://www.npr.org/2025/05/30/nx-s1-5415641/musk-leaves-doge-what-comes-next>.

¹⁴ Written testimony of Kimberly A. Byrd, Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Audit at the Social Security Administration, Office of the Inspector General to U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Social Security, July 14, 2016, <https://oig.ssa.gov/congressional-testimony/2016-07-14-newsroom-congressional-testimony-july14-ssa-modernization/>.

¹⁵ Journal of Computing Sciences in Colleges, "Bringing COBOL back into the college IT curriculum," Ed Lindoo, December 1, 2014, <https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.5555/2667432.2667440>.

¹⁶ Social Security Administration, "IT Modernization Plan: A Business and IT Journey," October 2017, <https://www.ssa.gov/open/materials/IT-Modernization-Plan.pdf>.

¹⁷ Letter from New York Legal Assistance Group to SSA Acting Commissioner Leland Dudek, April 23, 2025 (on file with Senator Warren's staff.)

¹⁸ *Id.*

and SNAP, meaning data losses or inaccuracies created during the IT modernization process could devastate the administration of other crucial safety net programs.¹⁹

Even if this worst-case scenario does not come to pass, disruptions to service caused by a rushed modernization program would further burden an already strained system. With almost 70 million Americans relying on Social Security payments per month,²⁰ an error rate affecting even 0.1 percent of payments would have the potential to interrupt the benefits of almost 70,000 people. This would be catastrophic for American retirees, with the majority of seniors on Social Security relying on the program as their primary source of income.²¹ Layered on top of the existing website crashes and payment errors that have taken place in recent months,²² it is likely that retirees and disabled Americans will find it harder than ever to receive their benefits in a timely manner. This is to say nothing of the security vulnerabilities that would be introduced by attempting to migrate these systems to new IT infrastructure in a rushed manner, leaving Social Security numbers and other personally identifiable information of hundreds of millions of Americans susceptible to hackers and other bad actors.²³

American taxpayers who have contributed to Social Security for their whole lives should not have to worry that unqualified DOGE employees are going to destroy the system that distributes their benefits or create security vulnerabilities that lead to their data being stolen. Since 2017, SSA has steadily phased out its legacy systems and replaced them with modern architecture to avoid disrupting the existing system and negatively impacting beneficiaries.²⁴ Abandoning this plan and empowering DOGE to root through complex and sensitive SSA systems could result in irreversible damage that costs hard-working Americans the benefits they are owed.

With these concerns in mind, we request that you respond to the following questions by June 17, 2025:

1. Are SSA staff working in collaboration with any DOGE staffers or otherwise following plans developed or led by any DOGE operative to upgrade the SSA's digital infrastructure?
2. Are you directing relevant SSA staff to follow the SSA's own IT modernization plan, last updated in 2024, or have you directed any subordinate to follow a plan created or issued by any individual associated with DOGE?

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ Social Security Administration, "Fact Sheet: Social Security," 2025, <https://www.ssa.gov/news/press/factsheets/basicfact-alt.pdf>.

²¹ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, "Social Security Benefits Are Modest," Paul N. Van de Water and Kathleen Romig, December 7, 2023, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/social-security/social-security-benefits-are-modest>.

²² Senator Elizabeth Warren, "Senate Democrats Highlight How DOGE Social Security Takeover Hurts Americans," press release, April 15, 2025, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/senate-democrats-highlight-how-doge-social-security-takeover-hurts-americans>.

²³ Letter from New York Legal Assistance Group to SSA Acting Commissioner Leland Dudek, April 23, 2025 (on file with Senator Warren's staff.)

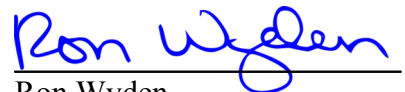
²⁴ Social Security Administration, "IT Modernization Plan: A Business and IT Journey," October 2017, <https://www.ssa.gov/open/materials/IT-Modernization-Plan.pdf>.

3. Has SSA made any substantial changes to, or deleted any entries in, any dataset, database, or other system of record in 2025? If so, were these alterations or deletions made at the direction of SSA personnel or DOGE personnel? Please identify any such changes.
4. Has SSA made any substantial changes to, or deleted any SSA program code in 2025? If so, were these alterations or deletions made at the direction of SSA personnel or DOGE personnel? Please identify any such changes.
5. What share of SSA and DOGE staffers currently working on digital infrastructure upgrades have training or experience in COBOL and other legacy systems used by the SSA?
6. Has SSA fired any staffers in the past six months who were working on digital modernization or otherwise involved in changes to IT infrastructure systems? If so, how many were fired and what was the average tenure of the fired employees?
7. How many SSA employees working on IT or digital modernization were reassigned to a non-IT position or have left the agency since January 20, 2025?
8. What is the average tenure of DOGE or SSA staffers currently working on digital modernization?
9. What cybersecurity and data privacy measures are being taken by SSA and DOGE staff to ensure that personally identifiable information will not be stolen, leaked, or lost during the upgrade process?
10. The DOGE team has reportedly accessed sensitive data in troubling ways, including by disabling automated tracking logs and accessing data without authorization, potentially increasing security vulnerabilities.²⁵ What measures are being taken to ensure only authorized personnel can access or alter these crucial databases, and has any SSA data been accessed or altered by unauthorized personnel to date?
11. Have there been any data leaks or hacks in the past six months associated with work on the IT modernization project?

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator
Ranking Member, Committee
on Finance

²⁵ Washington Post, “DOGE aims to pool federal data, putting personal information at risk,” Hannah Natanson et al., May 7, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2025/05/07/doge-government-data-immigration-social-security/>.