

After long waits at the SSA, its chief says things are getting better

By: Fatima Hussein, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — After complaints about staffing cuts and long waits to get help at the Social Security Administration, its commissioner says he's ready to make the case to Congress this week that things are getting a lot better at the embattled agency.

Frank Bisignano is expected to face pointed questions from lawmakers at a hearing on his agency's customer service performance, its ability to pay Americans their benefits, protect their privacy, and other questions about the inner workings of the SSA.

He plans to tout shorter wait times and other customer service metrics to a House Ways and Means Committee hearing slated for Wednesday, and will slam his predecessor for requiring appointments for field office visits, according to his prepared testimony which was viewed by The Associated Press.

In a letter sent to lawmakers ahead of the hearing, Bisignano states that the SSA has cut phone wait times by 75% under his leadership, fixed frustrating website issues, and served 50% more people.

"I've been very clear. We will meet clients where they want to be met. You want to call us on a phone, we'll have technology on the phone, or you can talk to somebody on the phone.

You want to come to a field office, you can come with an appointment, or without," Bisignano told The Associated Press in an interview.

Critics argue those gains are being achieved through temporary staffing shifts, increased reliance on online services, and workforce reductions that have created longer-term service risks, shifting bottlenecks around rather than solving staffing problems.

Bisignano dismisses the criticism. "People boo at Yankee Stadium, even when they're winning," he said.

Bisignano took over the agency after a series of chaotic customer service changes, leadership exits, and false allegations made by President Donald Trump and Elon Musk — who ran the Department of Government Efficiency cost-cutting program — that millions of dead people were receiving benefits.

The SSA laid off 7,000 workers at the start of the Trump administration. Roughly 2,000 employees were reassigned last year into direct-service positions, including staff whose jobs don't normally involve answering calls.

The SSA's Inspector General — its internal watchdog — has identified ongoing errors in benefit administration and claims processing. But its latest semi-annual report to Congress also shows the agency has made measurable progress in im-

proving telephone service and deploying technology to speed disability claims processing.

The union representing SSA employees and field office workers says some offices are severely understaffed. That includes Ironwood, Michigan; Decorah, Iowa; Havre, Montana; Big Spring, Texas; Sheridan, Wyoming; Glasgow, Montana; Pierre, South Dakota; Cedar City, Utah; and Cody, Wyoming, according to the American Federation of Government Employees Council 220.

But Bisignano said no field offices have been closed and noted that the agency is committed to meeting clients where they prefer.

"What I'm trying to achieve is to have a better way for the American public to interact with the Social Security Administration," Bisignano said.

Bisignano also serves as chief executive of the IRS, in a role that was created by the Trump administration. Asked about a new tax audit immunity deal for Trump and his family that was part of the controversial settlement crafted to resolve Trump's \$10 billion lawsuit against the IRS, Bisignano referred The Associated Press to Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent's recent comments to a congressional committee, where he refused comment on ongoing litigation.

succeed where I was at the time. I think about this same scenario when I deer hunt. I know that I will be better off if I will just come to know the 50 acres I've been given instead of trying to hunt 400 acres.

I can remember taking a picture of a young pine tree. It was growing from the middle of a huge rock, and it was thriving. What it couldn't go around, above, or under, it just went through. I knew it was not supposed to grow there but it didn't. I knew it was out of place, but it didn't. I could have explained to it every reason why it would never become a fruitful tree, but the only thing that would have been unfruitful were my words. Because, you see, it bloomed where it was planted.

Don't let anyone tell you that you will never succeed where you are. Don't let anyone add you to the average or make you fit into a certain research demographic. When God is

THE WICKER REPORT

SENATOR WICKER'S WEEKLY REPORT from CONGRESS

Wicker Dives Into Ocean Week

Mississippi Building 21st Century Blue Economy

It's been "Ocean Week" on Capitol Hill, and coastal states like Mississippi have taken the opportunity to showcase their contributions to the blue economy. Waterways have always been a key part of Mississippi commerce. Tourists are flocking to our beaches, lakes, and fisheries, and we have exported Mississippi ships and seafood across the globe. But in the last decade, we have also become a hub of 21st century maritime science and innovation.

Mississippi Built an Innovation Ecosystem

Mississippi hosts a network of researchers, scientists, military officials, entrepreneurs, and manufacturers, all developing the latest oceanographic technology. Analysts at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) are building data models for precise weather forecasts. Researchers at the Thad Cochran Marine Aquaculture Center are developing the latest aquaculture farming methods.

Drone technology is a big part of this activity. When most Americans hear the word "drones," they think of unmanned flying systems. But unmanned marine systems deserve recognition as the future of ocean exploration. Less than 50 percent of the ocean has been mapped. Increasing that figure would improve navigation, weath-

er tracking, and national security strategy.

I have worked to support drone development. In 2018, I introduced and helped pass the Commercial Engagement Through Ocean Technology (CE-NOTE) Act. The law helped streamline drone production by bringing together leaders from the academy, industry, and the military.

That collaboration is in full force today. The University of Southern Mississippi partners with the U.S. Navy and private innovators. Pearl River Community College, Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, and Hinds Community College partner with shipbuilders, meteorology and oceanography officials, and other experts. They equip young Mississippians to work in maritime manufacturing and drone production, as deckhands and tankermen, and in other sectors of the vast blue economy.

Benefits Are Statewide

Mississippi built a blue economy knowledge base and workforce, and the world is responding. Maritime technology companies are making the Magnolia State home, drawn by our geography, business-friendly environment, affordable cost of living, and thriving innovation networks.

USM's Gulf Blue Navigator program equips blue economy startups with management and growth tools while introducing them to

what Mississippi has to offer. A number of maritime drone companies operate along the coast — including one that moved its entire headquarters to Gulfport.

All of Mississippi stands to gain. The blue economy creates research opportunities for students and professors across the state. New companies bring high-tech job opportunities for those students after graduation. Aquaculture farmers are benefiting. Artificial intelligence tools improve fish stock and water quality readings, and drones now help monitor illegal fishing. The armed forces have found numerous military applications for maritime drones. They can send constant intelligence signals and travel into dangerous waters without endangering service members.

Congress Bringing Federal Support

In Congress, I am advocating for a number of federal investments that would add to this bustling research ecosystem. Among them are efforts to improve storm and weather tracking at the National Data Buoy Center and to allow NOAA to acquire more maritime drones. Another would help complete a National Science Foundation research vessel that will be used by Southern Miss. I am also pushing to increase ongoing work at the Ole Miss School of Law, which addresses legal issues relating to coasts and oceans.

We have found that maritime research investment leads to improved technology, and that those new products ultimately inform the next rounds of scientific study. This innovation cycle shows no signs of slowing down. Instead, we will continue attracting innovative job creators to Mississippi, further solidifying our place as a blue economy leader.

Ole Miss back in College World Series



(Photo from Ole Miss Athletics)

No. 18 Ole Miss baseball punched its ticket to the NCAA College World Series on Saturday with a 5-3 win over No. 5 Auburn. The Rebels swept through both the Regional and Super Regional rounds.

It will be Ole Miss' seventh time ever and first time since 2022, when they won the National Championship, to appear in the College

World Series.

Ole Miss head coach Mike Bianco has now guided the Rebels to three CWS in his tenure, which ties Tom Swayze for the most by a head coach in program history.

The Rebels will open CWS play this weekend, matching up with No. 4 North Carolina in the first best of three series

When I first began bass fishing as a young adult, I didn't have the luxury of a bass boat and all its frills. I fished with a friend who had a "V" hull aluminum boat. The trolling motor was even smaller. He owned a small cabin on the lake, so our fishing always started from the same location. Because of the limited horsepower we rarely traveled very far away. We always fished in the same places and seldom went home empty-handed. It seems as I got older and better equipped, I traveled farther

up and down the lake to find those illusive bass, only to have pretty much the same results. You see now I spend more of my time moving than I do fishing and while I can see what's below now with all the sonar, I once knew what was below by experience. I had fished Straight Creek Hollow so many times, under so many situations, that I knew where the bass were probably hiding. I was simply forced to bloom where I was planted. Oh, there were times that I wished I were up in the river or down beside the bridge; but I was forced to learn to