

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Social Security deterioration hit

Despite avoiding the budget axe, 17,000 SSA staffers are to be cut: results of a survey by Rep. Roybal.

California Congressman Edward R. Roybal (D), chairman of the House Select Committee on the Aging, released the findings of a survey of Social Security office employees April 20 which shows strong dissatisfaction with the quality of service now being provided by the Social Security Administration (SSA).

The survey confirms that, even though the President and Congress have agreed to keep Social Security "off the negotiating table" in their budget talks for fiscal year 1990, the program is suffering under the burden of a plan to reduce the national staff of the SSA by 17,000.

Advocates for the nation's elderly are worried that the swift bipartisan agreement to make a \$2.8 billion cut in the Medicare budget means that there is no longer a political party that the elderly can rely upon to fight for their interests.

"We are now being set up to become the victims of bipartisan consensus, which is a deceptive way of describing a one-party system," an advocate for causes of the elderly said here. "The worst aspect of the deception is that cuts in services are being introduced under the rubric of a 'kinder and gentler America,' which is a cruel hoax."

The survey Roybal released was requested after preliminary data from a national sampling of employees by the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) indicated that there are serious problems in many Social Security offices in providing adequate service to the public. His survey covered five Social Security

offices in the Los Angeles area.

"I find it very disturbing that out of 100 employees who responded to the survey, not a single person agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: There are enough staff to carry out SSA's mission in my office," Roybal declared.

Roybal added, "Yet just last week, Commissioner [Dorcas] Hardy told me in testimony before the Appropriations Committee that the SSA does not need any more staff to carry out its mission to provide quality services to the public. In fact, she came with a request to reduce 2,000 more staff in next year's budget."

Roybal's survey was conducted in March and April, and was closely modeled on an earlier survey conducted nationally by the AFGE. The following are among the findings of both the Roybal survey and the AFGE survey:

Statement: "SSA is now a better place to work than it was three years ago." Reply: 88% in the Roybal survey and 77.3% in the AFGE survey either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Statement: "There are enough staff to carry out SSA's mission in my office." Reply: 96% in the Roybal survey and 87% in the AFGE survey either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Statement: "All post-entitlement workloads are processed timely." Reply: 87% in the Roybal survey and 87% in the AFGE survey either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Statement: "My office will be able to provide high-quality services to claimants and beneficiaries during the next year." Reply: 77% in the Roybal

survey and 59% in the AFGE survey either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

These survey results conformed with the findings of a February 1989 study by the General Accounting Office (GAO), which noted that "compared with 1988, a significant number of SSA district and branch office managers and employees perceived a decline in SSA's services to the public and unit performance."

According to Roybal's office, an internal SSA survey of its managers found similar reactions. In response to the survey results, Roybal scheduled hearings by the Select Committee on Aging on the ability of the Social Security Administration to provide better neighborhood and community assistance to recipients.

A number of Social Security managers were slated to testify at the hearings, even though the Social Security Managers Association turned down an official invitation to testify for the second straight year. Fear of reprisals was given as the main reason the association and many more individual managers refused the offer to testify.

"It is unfortunate that many managers would have liked to provide testimony, but were afraid of reprisal," Roybal said. "Some have chosen to provide written testimony anonymously. My colleagues and I will be watching carefully to ensure that the managers who are testifying as private citizens will not be singled out for retribution."

Roybal said, "I am deeply concerned that the fundamental assumptions of SSA's new strategic plan are creating policies which inhibit the agency's ability to provide responsive and adequate personal services in local Social Security offices. SSA seems to be gearing its services to a national statistical profile rather than to persons with diverse needs."