



MESSAGE FROM THE COMMISSIONER



I am pleased to present my first strategic plan as your Commissioner. A successful strategic plan maps out at a high level the steps we need to take over the next 5 years to achieve our vision of the future. This strategic plan does that. I also recognize that strategic planning is not static; it is an ongoing process of continuous improvement. We will need to adjust this plan as the world and the needs of the public continue to change.

We face many challenges as we publish this plan. Over three-quarters of a million individuals are waiting for hearings on their disability applications. This backlog is unacceptable, and immediately upon becoming Commissioner, I made eliminating our hearings backlog my first priority. We have already made some progress, but we have much more to do.

Due to the aging of the baby boomers, we are also being inundated with retirement and disability claims. An increasing number of these individuals expect that we will provide services in new ways made possible by the Internet. In addition, we have had to commit substantial resources to non-traditional Social Security workloads, including new elements of the Medicare program and immigration enforcement. These increased workloads strain our ability to deliver acceptable results in key performance areas. To preserve the public's trust and confidence in our programs, we must move forward aggressively with process, policy, systems, regulatory, and legislative improvements.

Our workforce is one of our greatest strengths. With each new challenge, our employees have responded, as President Truman said, with "an unbeatable determination to do the job at hand." I am encouraged that, despite the stresses, the challenges we face have not shaken our resolve to provide the vital services on which the Nation depends. As we go about our work, we must continue to be guided by our long-held service principles that we serve with empathy, creativity, and integrity. We can accomplish our mission only through continued teamwork and the contribution of every Social Security employee, as well as the employees of our State and territorial partners, the Disability Determination Services.

Our success, however, requires more than the hard work and dedication of our talented workforce. We also need to rigorously explore and wisely employ new technology. As the National Academy of Sciences noted in its 2006 report¹, our aging systems infrastructure further compounds our challenges. Our computers maintain demographic, earnings, and benefit information on almost every American. We process over 75 million transactions daily. We store more than 250 million medical records, and add 2 million more each week. As the Information Age surges on, the public increasingly expects our electronic services will be secure and user-friendly. Providing such service to the public has the added benefit of helping us better manage our workloads. While we have effectively maintained and augmented our systems infrastructure to meet current security standards, some of our key computer systems and our primary data center are more than 30 years old and will not be able to meet our future workload, security, and data management challenges. A strong and modern infrastructure requires new investments in technology.

The public expects us to get things done. We are an organization of great skill and accomplishment; we know what needs to be done and how to do it. That is what this strategic plan is all about – it is our roadmap to address the major challenges ahead. This strategic plan charts the course that will enable us to maintain a strong level of performance on core workloads and work toward long-term improvement of our service to the public by concentrating on four goals: 1) eliminate our hearings backlog and prevent its recurrence; 2) improve the speed and quality of our disability process; 3) improve our retiree and other core services; and 4) preserve the public’s trust in our programs. Additionally, the plan recognizes that our employees and information technology are absolutely critical to our success. Only by investing properly in both our employees and new technology can we hope to achieve our ambitious goals.

The plan also includes a special initiative to *Encourage Saving*. The Nation’s declining savings rate not only makes the goal of a secure retirement more difficult to achieve for millions of Americans, it also endangers the health of our overall economy.

We are confident that the President, Members of Congress, and all of our stakeholders will work with us to achieve our goals. Together we can provide world-class service for generations to come.


MICHAEL J. ASTRUE
COMMISSIONER

¹To access a full copy of the report, please visit the following link: http://books.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=11920