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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 4, 2011

The Honorable Michael J. Astrue
Commissioner of Social Security
6401 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, Maryland 21235

Dear Commissioner Astrue:

Thank you for your continued leadership of the Social Security Administration (SSA) and demonstrated commitment to improving SSA's service to the public. I commend your agency for the website's recognition by the American Customer Satisfaction Index and your maintenance of over 50 informational publications available to the public.

I write today to request your attention to a gap in Social Security's otherwise extensive public communication. Recently, my office was contacted by a concerned constituent who is in the process of gender transition. My constituent visited her local Social Security field office to inquire how to update her gender data with the SSA. The representative at the window orally explained the established policy as my constituent stood in the public waiting room. Unfortunately, this interaction proved embarrassing to my constituent who regards her gender status as a private medical matter. She was made uncomfortable by SSA employees who spoke loudly enough that other waiting beneficiaries heard her inquiry. Since that time, my constituent has been contacted by the Office of Public Inquires who graciously provided her the guidance she needed.

As you already know, the SSA has no informational publication on its policy regarding gender data change for Social Security staff to share with inquiring beneficiaries or the public to access online. The language used by Social Security employees in the Program Operations Manual System (POMS) is technical and not written for a public audience. Additionally, POMS does not provide Social Security staff the training necessary to discuss the sensitive personal and medical information required to update one's gender data.

To enhance Social Security Administration's current public communication, I encourage the Administration to create an easily accessible publication that provides a plain-English explanation of your gender data change policy, and that you make this publication available to beneficiaries in your field offices and to the public online.

I expect that such a publication may reduce the potential for the type of embarrassment my constituent experienced. Additionally, this publication could be an important resource both for employers who compare gender data when verifying their employees' identity and for treating physicians who need guidance on the type of documentation patients need to comply with SSA's gender data change policy.

I look forward to working with you to address this issue and to develop a strategy that establishes easily accessible guidance about Social Security's gender data change policy. Thank you for your time and attention to these concerns.

Sincerely



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator