

FrontLine

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President's Message

By Rick Warsinskey, President, NCSSMA

One thing I've learned many times over is that our assumptions aren't always correct. Recently we published our fifth edition of the Survey of Management. One question that really stood out was the question: "Rate Your Job Satisfaction."

The results to this question were that nearly 64% rated their job satisfaction as "good or very good" and only 17% rated it "poor or very poor." After the Survey was published I started receiving inquiries as to why job satisfaction in Field and TSC management is so high at a time when we are facing significant staffing shortages in many offices which often result in a great deal of pressure on the job to keep our offices running.

After thinking about the responses, I concluded that SSA management by and large enjoys working for SSA even though it can be a highly stressful job. Why is this?

I would say the main reason is due to the fact that our main SSA mission is helping people receive the benefits they worked very hard to receive or helping people survive the hardships of a disability or being aged without any income. It is a good feeling to go home every day knowing we can help make a difference.

Knowing we can make a difference in helping the American public is why we work so diligently to run the best offices we can while trying our best to keep up the morale of our staffs. We have also worked very hard to make the best use of our resources as we can't afford any waste. It's no surprise that SSA leads the government in increased productivity on an annual basis!

I believe as management we need to do our best to keep SSA's reputation as positive as we can even with the growing degradation of our services as we continue to face ongoing budget challenges. This is also something our association is committed to do. We have established a number of committees such as our Management, Staffing and Training, Automation and Service Delivery Committees that really try to ensure that SSA is the best agency in the federal government. Many of the regional associations also have these same parallel committees. All of you can play important roles by continuing to volunteer to join these committees or by sending in your suggestions to your regional association. We try to look at every suggestion that comes in.

One thing I'll say. The President may be the daily face of this association. But it is you that really makes a difference. And the best ideas come from you!

Notes from the New England Social Security Management Association Annual Meeting on May 17, 2007

Paul Gilfillan
DM, Meriden, Connecticut

Under cool, leaden skies, members of the New England Social Security Management Association (NESSMA), traveled from the North, South, East, and West to the Best Western Royal Plaza Hotel in Marlborough, Massachusetts for our annual meeting on May 17, 2007. Eighty members (nearly half of our membership) attended the event.

Our meeting began with the outgoing president, Carla Martin, introducing the officers of the Executive Council. These include myself as President, Sylviane Haldiman as Vice President, Donna Gordon as Treasurer, and Lisa Chrabolowski as Secretary. Carla stated that she had not realized until she served as NESSMA President on the National Council, the impact and influence that NCSSMA has on a national level. NCSSMA has developed partnerships with Central Office, AARP, the Government Managers Coalition and many others. Though not all of our suggestions and recommendations are realized, make no mistake, we have a definite voice in many arenas. The organization really serves as a vehicle for us all to have our views and ideas expressed.

Susan Harding, our Acting Regional Commissioner, addressed the group. Susan spoke on a

variety of topics including staffing, Enumeration Card Centers, the Disability Service Initiative, and Redetermination/Limited Issue Processing. Susan was followed by Manny Nunez, our ARC-MOS. Manny pointed out several facts, but the one that really captured our attention was that our region's staffing numbers are the lowest they have been for nearly thirty years. The staffing losses come at a time when our region's workload share has risen to a percentage of the national share not seen for many years.

Following a brief but candid question and answer session with Susan and Manny, our association presented the annual James P. McNamara award for outstanding community service to Doug Loux, Area Systems Coordinator in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Some of the narrative from Doug's nomination read as follows:

For over 20 years, Doug has been active in many organizations that serve the community of western Massachusetts. He has unselfishly given his time to provide counseling and support for the mentally ill, financial counseling for the elderly, and a variety of other programs.

Our annual Regional Office Employee of the Year award went to the entire LMR Team, in recognition for their hard work training and implementing PACS. After an excellent lunch, we heard the latest from Washington Representative Rachel Emmons, and then a cogent and concise update on national issues from our National President Rick Warsinskey.

Editor's Corner

By Phil Walton

Security Perspective

Just about the time you want to whine about all the security and integrity protocols we have in SSA, you look around...

A year or so ago it was reported that government purchase cards had been used to fraudulently buy a variety of personal items, including an automobile. All of the examples cited occurred in federal agencies other than SSA. I think I know why.

A few months ago we were starting a training class in the office and we needed to supply a couple of calculators to the students. I was on my way back from a meeting outside the office when I checked in with the office and found we needed these. I went to a store that I was passing by and purchased a couple of calculators. This store was one of those super stores where you can buy milk, motor oil and a parakeet all in one stop. When I got back to the office, some 15 minutes later, I received a phone call from Citibank. It seems someone had used my government credit card in what their system classified as a grocery store and they wanted to alert me to possible misuse. I explained the store also had other items and they cleared their alert.

A total expense of \$16.73 detected in 15 minutes and reported back. I asked the caller if I had bought a new Mustang, would they call me. The answer--- if the purchase is more than \$50.00 the

call goes to the agency finance people.

Another example: there is not a manager anywhere who does not tire of the paperwork involved in the separation of duties protocol for purchasing. One person has to approve the purchase, another has to document receipt of the goods or services, etc. It doesn't matter if it is a \$5.00 item. At times this seems silly when the expense is an obvious need (paper, toner, etc) but I now appreciate the fact that posterior is covered in this manner.

Recently here in northwest Ohio a state university employee was indicted and pled guilty to purchasing \$600,000 worth of goods (largely computer related), receiving them and then reselling them on eBay. This went on over the period of several years. Several years!

I can't buy two calculators without getting a phone call! From the perspective of the checks and balances our purchasing requires, that this could happen is mind-boggling.

Our recent PII emphasis also gives the same message.

There is a current news story out of a state in the Midwest about the loss of a data storage device containing PII (personally identifying information) for state employees, vendors and some members of the public. It seems this occurred when a back up of data was performed. Then an employee put the data storage device in his car and went home. The car was broken into and the device disappeared. As a result the state is now paying in excess of \$700,000 to purchase credit-monitoring services for all affected employees and others.

You may think this was a freak incident, a breach of security. Removing such data from the agency space requires approvals and documentation, right? Wrong. It turns out the security protocol called for the back up data to be taken home by employees. Back ups were not placed in fireproof safes, or in a secure off-site location. Various employees just took them home for safekeeping. What would be a very serious violation in SSA and cause for disciplinary action was the standard operating procedure in this case.

So the next time you want to complain about the few extra minutes of documentation required, or the added step or two, take a deep breath and reflect on what things could be like without the extra effort.

A Retrospective View of SSA

By Phil Walton

Sometimes a good way to sharpen your perspective on things today is to look back and reflect on just how far we have come -- whether it is technology or any other consideration, our operations today are better appreciated and understood when viewed in light of our historical operations. With that in mind we are going to run regular pieces describing some of what our more historically aware members recall.

For the less veteran members -- no, we are not going to pummel you with stories about how we had

to walk miles through the snow to get to the office to adjudicate a claim -- these historical pieces are intended as items of interest primarily, education secondarily.

I will begin this series.

Captive Audience

I was a field representative in Joliet, Illinois for twelve months, in 1977 and 1978. Back then we still paid Social Security benefits to incarcerated felons. In addition to myriad reasons why the law changed to prohibit these payments, my personal experience showed it did not make operational sense as well.

In Joliet there were several state prisons, the biggest of which is known as Stateville.

This was Illinois' maximum security facility then. You may be familiar with the name if you have seen the movie, *The Blues Brothers*. I went to Stateville twice a month to interview beneficiaries and applicants.

My visits to the prison were a cause for high security. The reason: if inmates saw someone talking to me, they assumed they were receiving benefits. Word would get passed back to the person seen talking to me that he should turn over his check each month or else he or his family on the outside would have some serious problems. So it was critical that anyone coming to talk to me was secreted in. Most of the time inmates were wrapped in a blanket, put in a large wheeled basket and rolled into my interview room. They would remove their cover, climb out of the basket and sit down. When the interview was complete, back they would go into the incognito routine. It seemed strange at first, but as I became aware of how dangerous the situation would be otherwise, it soon seemed very normal.

Then there were the weird twists to some post entitlement situations. I recall very clearly interviewing more than a few prisoners who were fully shackled (hands and feet) and asking them what they intended to do about their student benefit overpayment of a few hundred dollars. When someone is serving two consecutive life sentences with no possibility of parole, it's difficult to get their attention focused on paying back their overpayment. One such prisoner, told me with a wide grin, "If I was a taxpayer, I would say you are wasting your time...But since I am not a taxpayer and haven't had a visitor in years, I appreciate your dropping by to see me."

Make it Personal

Rosali Velasco, ADM, Montebello CA

My career with SSA started back in 1975 in Pasadena, California. In those days, there were over 100 employees in offices considered "large." Two Claims Representatives were assigned a clerical. Anyone who needed a print out of a query wrote out the SSN and handed it to a designated employee who input the request at one of the three computers housed in the Field Office. One of my fondest memories of my first assignment in Pasadena was being the phone operator. I sat on a platform where I could see every employee in the office. There was a switchboard with pull out plugs. When the line rang, I would pull out the plug and plug it into the

extension of the employee the call was for. It was a blast!

People would line up to request a Social Security card. I would actually sit at a typewriter and type out the name and SSN dictated to me on a pre-filled Social Security card by the claimant in front of me.

It is hard to imagine doing the work the way we did then with the number of employees we have now. I love our technology and know my job as a CR would have been much easier with the computers and software programs we have now.

My management journey began in the late 1980s. Being in management changed my entire perspective and I became fully committed to leading employees into feeling good about the difference they make in each and every contact with our public.

I have held many positions; Operations Supervisor, Technical Instructor, ASC, mentoring IVT classes, managing a level II office and currently working in the ADM position. Running operations in a Los Angeles Field Office can be quite challenging and enlightening. There is such a wonderfully diverse group of people in both employees and our public.

I am very proud of the fact that I have been working in this agency for 32 years and still love my job. Employees are dedicated and hardworking and really care about those they help.

My advice to employees when they get a little stressed out in the mix of paperwork and goals is to slow down and take a deep breath. That at night when they put their head on their pillow to think of at least one person they served that day and how they made a positive difference.

My advice to all employees is “don’t take it personal,” “make it personal.” Think of themselves, their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, children, friends, etc. as being on the other side of the counter. How long should one wait for an interview, how should they be greeted and talked to? How does one want to feel when walking out the door?

My advice to my supervisors is to be open, honest, keep their word and follow through with their employees and to lead by example.

You may ask who am I to give advice? I am an experienced employee who has worked in public service for many years and I feel fortunate to work in an agency that has strong leaders who really care about their employees and the American people. I am so proud to be working for an agency that truly makes a difference in so many communities.

I will always be grateful for Mrs. Beal, my high school teacher. She is still so vivid in my mind, a tiny little lady with a huge head of gray hair that moved sort of like Woodstock (from Charlie Brown) in the front of her head. She walked up to me one day and told me she had made an appointment for me to take the civil service test and that I would be going on a bus to Los Angeles. I remember resisting and not really wanting to go, however she insisted. Her insistence put me on a path that has been both challenging and rewarding. Thanks Mrs. Beal.

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