

## **FrontLine**

Welcome to the old Mass Media in new trappings. For many years the Mass Media was issued by the National Council of Social Security Management Associations (NCSSMA) on paper and delivered via surface mail. Moving to an electronic format had been under discussion for some time. Eventually it became evident we should cut to the quick and just do it. This first edition is coming to you in Word format. In the not too distant future, we will likely be publishing in straight email text for easier delivery to all of our external readers. In short, this conversion is a work in progress. Please bear with us as we evolve.

Along with the new format comes a new name ---- FrontLine. We asked for your ideas on the new name and the NC executive committee selected Frontline from hundreds of submissions. The winning idea was from Dale Hilding, DM, Pendleton, OR who gets a trip to the annual meeting in Seattle this fall for his idea.

Organizations large and small all know one thing for sure --- their mission, in its most essential form, is defined and refined at the frontline of service or product delivery. Field and TSC managers and staff alike see this mission definition daily in the voices and eyes of the American public. So, it is fitting that we use a new name that reminds us where we live and work.

As the FrontLine progresses, we ask that you contact us with any comments, letters to the editor or any issues you wish to see highlighted. Just drop a note to [phil.walton@ssa.gov](mailto:phil.walton@ssa.gov).

### **President's Message**

By Steve Korn

I hope you enjoy this inaugural "electronic" version of our former paper MASS Media. By coming to you via e-mail rather than on paper, we will be able to cut up to 60 days from the time the newsletter is edited to the time you receive it. Hopefully this will make the commentary significantly more topical. Other benefits include significant cost savings in both production and distribution, and the ability to expand our readership. One thing that will not change is our commitment to keep our readers informed of the

challenges and trends affecting the Social Security Administration and the role of our Association.

For the rest of my column, I would like to share the following perspectives gained in the little over 9 months since I was elected NCSSMA President.

### **Communications**

Perhaps my number one focus since becoming president has been improving the level of communications between those of us who manage our front-line offices and Agency executives in Central Office. The Social Security Advisory Board noted in their report last year that our culture does not often encourage this type of open and honest communication, especially when the message is not what the decision-makers want to hear. First, let me say that both Commissioner Apfel and Deputy Commissioner Halter have been very open to listening to and acting upon NCSSMA's concerns, even when the message has not been supportive of Agency decisions. In addition, communications with other executives has been more positive than negative. However, I still find that some SSA executives are reluctant to share information with NCSSMA on many of the important issues that affect us until after decisions are made, and are then defensive when receiving feedback that is not supportive of these decisions. This is disappointing as it often leads to less than optimal decisions, and unfortunately demonstrates a lack of respect for our front line managers. In their defense, executives are sometimes reluctant to share information in advance for fear that it will be used improperly. My continuing challenge is to remind all of our executives that NCSSMA is a positive and professional partner. Simply because we raise questions or offer alternatives at times does not change that.

### **Washington Representative**

I have been extremely pleased with the level of support provided NCSSMA by our new Washington representative, Sara Garland and her assistant, Rachel Emmons. Sara has successfully expanded our visibility on Capitol Hill and access to key Congressional decision-makers. During a recent Executive Committee visit to Washington, Sara was able to arrange direct

access not only to key staff, but also to several Congressman and Senators. This type of access is especially important this year as we work to ensure that we receive from Congress the resources we need to do our jobs. For example, I was able to directly meet with Senator Kurt Conrad, who stands to be the ranking Democrat on the Senate Budget Committee (one of the most important committees in Congress). As a result of my meeting with Senator Conrad, he went to the floor of the Senate and spoke strongly in support of restoring proposed cuts to our appropriation. While increasing NCSSMA's influence and effectiveness on the Hill is Sara's most important role, I also understand that the bi-weekly legislative reports remain the most important link between Sara and our members. Sara and I are committed to improving the content of these reports to reflect the needs of all members based on the ongoing feedback we have actively gathered.

### **Vision 2010**

By the time you read this, the SSA Vision 2010 report will have been released or will almost be ready for release. I have seen the draft report and was generally very pleased with its recognition of the important role of field offices, both as vehicles to deliver service on a community based level, and to develop and nurture cooperative relationships with other community organizations. The issuance of this vision will hopefully end speculation that there are in fact high level Agency plans to close significant numbers of field offices. I was also happy to see a strong focus on expanding the role of our TSC's to deliver true one-stop-shopping. If there was a weakness in the draft report, it was in failing to specifically recognize the extreme pressures that our field offices are currently facing due to lack of staff and adequate management support. Ensuring that SSA executives fully recognize and deal with this reality will be one of the challenges facing NCSSMA as we move from the vision to service delivery decision making.

### **Regional Activities**

As a recurring feature, we will be asking each of the regional associations to highlight their activities and/or membership concerns.

### **Atlanta**

The Atlanta Region Management Association (ARMA) will have their Annual Meeting at the Palace Casino Resort in Biloxi, Mississippi on August 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>, 2000. Invited guests include Atlanta Regional Commissioner Myrtle Habersham, NCSSMA President Steve Korn, and Government Affairs Consultant Sara Garland. For information, contact Jan McDonald at 941-747-3277 or Steve Helms at 228-864-7526.

Elections for several ARMA Executive Committee positions will be held in September 2000. Offices up for election are Secretary, Treasurer and Area Vice-Presidents in Alabama, Tennessee, North Carolina, Mississippi, and Kentucky.

### **Denver**

The Denver region held a Regional Management Conference the week of June 5-9. The conference was planned by field managers, resulting in an agenda that addressed many pertinent issues relating specifically to field offices. Agenda items included staffing, AFGE contract training, as well as technical training topics. Carolyn Colvin, DCO, was the introductory speaker at the conference.

Although managers in this region were pleased to see upgrades for the TSC managers, equitable upgrades for all managers remains a very hot topic in light of the newly revised classification criteria and the strained rationale for continuing to leave some managers completely out of the process.

### **San Francisco**

San Francisco members are dealing with a variety of issues, most notably:

- Interest in the recently revised Level I office criteria --- one-third of the offices being considered for reclassification are located in Region IX.
- Title VIII (SVB) claims- Region IX is processing 80% of the claims nationwide and has over half of the 4700 inquiries received to date.
- Making plans for SFRMA's annual meeting November 9-10 at the Hyatt Regency in Monterey, CA. Our meeting will coincide with "The Great Wine Escape" weekend, surely making it all the more enjoyable.

And, finally, celebrating the success of the World Champion LA Lakers!

## **Chicago**

The Chicago Region Social Security Management Association (CSSMA) will convene its Annual Meeting on September 15 & 16, 2000 at the Radisson Star Plaza in Merrillville, IN. Activities start on the 15<sup>th</sup> with a workshop on stress management. The business meeting on the 16<sup>th</sup> will include Regional Commissioner Jim Martin, NCSSMA President Steve Korn and Grassroots Committee Chairman Ron Niesing. Russ Howard's band will headline the Saturday night party, which will be a 70's reunion. It will be a trip back in time as CSSMA members dig out bell-bottoms, love beads and leisure suits to rock late into the night. (This is the Midwest, after all, so some members have been wearing these things for the last 30 years.)

Some of the more pressing current issues among CSSMA membership include the recruitment, training and retention of new hires; upgrades; staffing; limited resources; the balanced processing of workloads; local phone service and productivity initiatives.

## **Kansas City**

The Kansas City Management Association ran a recruiting campaign. A drawing was offered for new members and their recruiters. The prize was a trip to the October NC annual meeting in Seattle. The drive resulted in 19 new members. Despite some offsetting losses with early retirements and reassignments, we still had a nearly 5% gain in membership.

## **New England**

This year NESSMA activities will center on two main themes. The first is improving communication with both our membership and the regional office. The NESSMA will be part of this effort. The second objective is increasing our efforts to enroll new members. Efforts have been successful but we are still looking at new ways to reach those who have never joined our organization and those who are just becoming eligible.

## **Philadelphia**

The PRMA Executive Council met with our Regional Commissioner on May 19<sup>th</sup>. One item of much importance that we discussed with our RC was the replacement ratio in the field for losses due to early retirement. Some of the other issues discussed included the national rollout of Immediate Claims Taking and its impact on our region, the Article 26 Assessment Criteria Pilot and the Electronic Disability Project (eDIB).

Our annual meeting will be held August 10-12 at Canaan Valley Resort, Davis, WV. Our guest speaker will be Bill Gray, Deputy Assistant Commissioner, Office of Systems. Other distinguished guests include Steve Korn, NCSSMA President, and Sara Garland, NCSSMA Government Affairs Consultant.

### **Dallas**

As always, DRMA is seeking to improve communications, especially with our members. Our latest enhancement is the DRMA Intranet WEB page. DRMA is especially appreciative of the contributions of Lorie Kraft in getting the page up and running. The page can be viewed at <http://10.196.138.166/DRMA>.

DRMA has established an effective partnership instrument in the Emphasis Plan. It is a proactive approach to identify and address problems in conjunction with the Area Directors and Regional Office staff. The Emphasis Plan can be viewed on the WEB page along with committee assignments and activities.

DRMA was pleased to send representatives to a Regional SSA Leadership Conference in Houston. DRMA sponsored the morning break to express appreciation to members for their support.

Many offices in the region are in the process of hiring from the outside to fill vacancies. We are really excited about the opportunity of bringing new talent and fresh ideas into SSA.

### **New York**

Our members were delighted that at long last the GS-12 TSC Managers were upgraded to the GS-13. On a related note, we are anxiously awaiting

the outcome of the application of the new level 1 criteria. In general, we feel the new criteria are arbitrarily stringent. We were disappointed the NCSSMA was denied the opportunity to participate in the formulation of these criteria.

Our members have found the “2010 Vision” interesting but have expressed strong concerns that it not become a euphemism for centralizing human resources at the expense of true community-based service.

### **News Item--- NCSSMA Visits Capitol Hill**

By Ron Niesing, Immediate Past President, NCSSMA

Members of the NCSSMA Executive Committee met with lawmakers and congressional committees on June 15. The intent was to make Members of Congress more aware of SSA’s resource needs from the perspective of the people who work on the frontlines and deliver face-to-face service to the public. Key points covered included: future workloads for the agency, our changing workforce, and a comparison of the various budget options. We provided rationale for removing SSA’s administrative budget from statutory budget caps. Several discussions were also held on the need to correct the cap on overtime that has existed since 1966. By the end of our Capitol Hill visits, five congressmen, two senators, fourteen key staff on both the Senate and House side, and staff from two Senate committees and one House committee were visited.

### **Editor’s Corner**

By Phil Walton

### **Communication**

Looking over the President’s Message and the regional reports above, one theme is clear. Everyone is hopped up about communications. The problem

is communications is one of those vague words that gets bandied about a lot more than it ever gets defined. It's kind of like "morale". Everybody wants better communication and improved morale. The problem is everyone is usually talking about different things. But we'd better put some real effort into getting on the same page. And the sooner the better.

The recent organizational survey revealed 87% of SSA senior staff feels employee opinions count while 37% of employees agree. That 50% gap would make anyone do a double take.

We would offer one caveat as this issue draws attention and action. Too often when a "communication" problem is identified, the quick solution is to create more infrastructure ---- i.e. more workgroups, committees, newsletters, web sites, and all the other tools of communication. But adding tools when there is something awry in the culture simply adds odd, spare parts to a machine that isn't working all that well to begin with. We can only hope that less attention will be given to the accoutrements and more to the substance of the issue.

## **Upgrades**

Congratulations to the Teleservice Center Managers around the country on their recent upgrade. The NC had been pushing for these upgrades since the first round of field management upgrades, some three and one-half years ago. Though long-delayed, these upgrades represent recognition of the important work of the TSCM's. Hats off to them!

The meetings that produced these TSCM upgrades also addressed a couple of other upgrade issues, with considerably less positive results.

First, the Level 1 office criteria was rewritten and issued. Though it's generated considerable discussion, the fundamental question remains --- why the rewrite? The last criteria issued in December 1996 were much simpler and more straightforward in service area numbers, etc. What happened in the meantime to make this revised set of numbers needed? The former criteria applied in tandem with some of the more recent new rules

(reporting directly to an AD, etc.) would seem more equitable and less subjective.

The second issue was the issue of the former Class I offices. Ironically enough, much of the impetus for the March and May upgrade meetings involved concern about pay equity for managers in large urban settings who have been left out of the upgrade process. Incentives and upgrades were to be considered. The final result was neither would be done. The rationale was limited. It seems nothing could be done because of “organizational setting”. As you can imagine, that euphemistic phrase has been subject to a lot of interpretation by the former Class I managers.

For those managers who are still trying mightily to get pay equity, stick with it. For those managers whose upgrade is now a distant memory, understand what your peers are going through when everyone around them has been recognized but they are still on the outside looking in. Take some time to listen and give your moral support.

### **Final Note**

As we begin the transition from the Mass Media to the FrontLine, I want to express my personal gratitude and that of NC for the years of work on the Mass Media by Bob Boch, Bob Duncan and Jim Lizon. These three volunteered hundreds of hours to produce and distribute the Mass Media. Their personal contributions, spanning a number of years, helped the NC present its views in an effective manner. It's members like these that keep the NCSSMA strong.

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