

DEEP STATE DIARIES

INSIDE THE DOGE THREAT TO SOCIAL SECURITY

A day in the life of a claims rep for America's largest government program.

By E. Tammy Kim

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• • • **h**en the claims representative, whom I'll call Steven, sat down at his computer around 7:15 A.M. last week, he had already been awake for an hour and a half. The morning routine for him and his family is best described as “fend for yourself,” he said. That day, he waited for his older son to shower before taking his turn; neither he nor his wife had time for breakfast. He had joined the Social Security Administration two decades ago, and came to specialize in one of its more complex and lesser-known functions: providing a form of welfare called Supplemental Security Income, or S.S.I., to people who are disabled or extremely poor. But the S.S.A. is so understaffed that Steven does a bit of everything. “My job is to be kind of like an octopus,” he said. The agency’s administrative budget had not kept up with its rising workload as more people aged into retirement. Now news outlets were reporting that President Donald Trump and Elon Musk, via Musk’s DOGE outfit, planned to fire up to half of the agency’s sixty-thousand-odd employees. (The S.S.A. later said that its goal was to lose seven thousand.) DOGE had also gained access to S.S.A. databases. “We don’t know how long we’ll be here,” Steven said. “Some people are really pissed. Others are sad and emotional. Others are making plans.” A couple days earlier, Trump had delivered a long self-congratulatory speech to Congress, in which he accused the S.S.A. of “shocking levels of incompetence and probable fraud.”

Steven lives in a Midwestern town near where he was born and raised, which means that he occasionally recognizes a relative or a family friend in a case file and has to recuse himself. Three days a week, he’s at a cubicle in a regional field office, one of twelve hundred across the U.S. The other two days, he works from home, at a plastic folding table in the corner of his bedroom. He was on the early shift. His laptop was propped up on a neon-green bin, the kind typically used to store Legos or crayons. It was flanked by two large monitors, creating a triptych. All around him were piles of kids’

clothes and books. Near his left foot was a tiny metal car; he had taped yellow notecards reading “clock,” “fan,” and “shelf” to a clock, fan, and shelf for the benefit of his youngest child, who was learning to read. Steven’s wife made drop-offs at kindergarten and day care, then came home. She has her own office setup downstairs.

The day officially started when Steven logged on to a dozen software programs. One had a blocky monochrome interface that looked like it was from the late nineties. Another was labelled “Workload Action Center,” in a light-brown, slanted font of a similar vintage. Steven kept a list of his passwords, which he had to routinely update, on a scrap of paper next to his keyboard. He scanned something called a “Tickle List” that highlighted urgent cases. His primary task was to conduct nonmedical “redetermination” interviews (code: “RZ”)—part of the S.S.A.’s process for insuring that current recipients are still eligible to receive benefits. More than seven million Americans of all ages count on S.S.I., and sixty-eight million seniors receive earned retirement payments. Social Security is the largest government program in the country and most recipients’ main source of income. It was envisioned by Frances Perkins during the Great Depression.

“Redeterminations are the highest priority,” Steven said. “We should have three to five people on them at every office. Sometimes there’s only one.”

He put on a wireless headset that connected to his laptop and an online phone system. The first redetermination call was with a parent who was receiving S.S.I. on behalf of a disabled child. “Hi, this is Steven, from Social Security Administration,” he said. “I’m just calling to see if you’re able to do the redetermination appointment.” His stomach growled. The bottom-right corner of his center screen flickered with notifications. He stayed with the caller. Date of birth? Marriages? Job placements? He clicked “yes” and “no” bubbles and typed in numbers. He had much of the script memorized. “Any items held for potential value?” he asked. “Promissory notes, real property or business property, or ABLE accounts?” S.S.I. is allocated based on an applicant’s income, assets, family size, and other factors. It often takes a year,

and the help of a lawyer, to get a decision. (Earlier in Steven's career, the time frame had been three to six months.) If an application is rejected, the case can be appealed to an administrative-law judge, and the wait for those hearings is around two years.

"That was the last amount verified," Steven continued. "Has that changed?" While waiting for the program to advance to the next screen, he glanced at e-mails on his rightmost monitor. There were more from headquarters and human resources and the employees' union than usual. Since November, three S.S.A. commissioners or acting commissioners had come and gone: Martin O'Malley, Carolyn W. Colvin, and Michelle King. The guy in charge now was Leland Dudek, whom Trump had elevated from a middle-management role for his eagerness to help DOGE access S.S.A. files, a vast library of individual medical, housing, family, and financial records. Dudek announced plans to eliminate six out of ten regional headquarters; several directors left the agency. In an all-staff e-mail, Dudek wrote:

Criticism, contempt, stonewalling, and defensiveness are the four forces that can end any relationship and weaken any institution. . . .

Elections have consequences. . . .

Now, under President Trump, we follow established precedent: we serve at the pleasure and direction of the President. Only the Courts or Congress can intervene.

The latest e-mail from headquarters stated that, "effective today," employees were prohibited from engaging in "Internet browsing" of "general news" or "sports" on "government-furnished equipment."

Steven was almost done with the redetermination. Hard cases, like an overpayment that needed to be clawed back, could "make the conversation longer, vulgar." This one was easy; the payments, of around a thousand dollars per month, would continue. "You will receive a summary statement regarding the information that we discussed," he said. He moved on to a

second call. This one, too, involved a young adult whose caretaker—in this case, a nonprofit organization—was the payee. “Hello. This is Steven from Social Security. How are you?” His cellphone buzzed. Since Trump’s reelection, he had been in a prolific, darkly humorous group chat with fellow S.S.A. workers in the Midwest. He referred to them as his sisters and brothers. The incoming message was a link to a news story about the imminent closure of S.S.A. field offices in the area. One man in the chat, who voted Republican but had grown skeptical of Trump, wrote, “Fucking unbelievable. . . . This would devastate our agency’s ability to serve the public.”

Meanwhile, the redetermination call was getting tricky. A new source of income seemed to be complicating the calculation of resources. Steven put the nonprofit on hold and logged into Equifax. He walked across the room to grab a plastic bottle of water and took a swig. “I’m trying really not to go off the deep end,” he said. If his office closed, and the neighboring offices closed, many people would have no way of getting benefits. For one thing, applications for Social Security cards and certain forms of S.S.I. had to be submitted in person.

Steven worried about his own well-being, too. His kids were on his health insurance. He and his wife had to take care of his father. S.S.A.’s human-resources division had sent an e-mail titled “Organizational Restructuring—Availability of Voluntary Reassignment, Early Out Retirement, and Separation Incentive Payments to ALL ELIGIBLE EMPLOYEES—No Component or Position Exceptions,” which seemed to pressure workers to leave. “A lot of this stuff is intentionally degrading,” Steven said. “They’re trying to do whatever they can to get people to resign.” Recently, he and other field-office staff were told that their jobs were safe because they were “mission critical.” That was reassuring, but only “a little bit.”

When the Equifax search proved inconclusive, Steven told the nonprofit, “I’ll have to put this on the back burner for a bit until I can get some info.”

All three of his screens were noisy. In Microsoft Teams, a supervisor was asking for updates on specific cases. Another window showed the names of people waiting in the lobby of the field office, in real time. He stared at a name in the queue. “This one, I’ve been playing phone tag with her,” Steven said. He opened a chat to alert a colleague at the office.

The work is surprisingly personal. A Social Security file contains a lot of intimate information. From a quick glance, Steven can tell where a recipient was born, what language they speak, whether they’d been involved in the child-welfare system, if they are married, whether that marriage had ended as a result of divorce or death. He has some colleagues whose “attitudes suck to high heaven,” caused by a mix of stress and a suspicion of the poor. “I love helping people,” he said. “You’re the first contact for them.”

Next, Steven had to get “on the phones.” Fielding random calls on the S.S.A. hotline isn’t technically part of his job, but he didn’t question the assignment. For several weeks, everyone had been required to help out. “Good morning. Social Security. This is Steven,” he said. “What is your Social Security number, please? All right, starting with your name and date of birth . . .” He wrapped up his first few calls rather quickly. He sent out a missing tax document, scheduled a father for an in-person appointment to get a Social Security card for his baby, and confirmed bank information for a recipient’s direct deposit. A fourth call, involving a lost check, was more complicated. He rubbed his forehead with his thumbs and forefingers.

Steven later received two mass e-mails. The first reminded all S.S.A. employees to send their “mandatory weekly assignment”—the “What Did You Do Last Week” e-mail, with five bullet points summarizing what they had worked on—directly to the government’s Office of Personnel Management, not to anyone in their actual agency. The second one was yet another plea for workers to quit or take early retirement. It warned that some who opted to remain in “non-mission critical positions” might be reassigned to S.S.A. call centers. No definition of “non-mission critical” was offered.

“I just keep wondering, *How long can I be doing this?*” Steven said. Many years before Trump and DOGE, there was a period when he could not sleep. “The job would cause me to wake up in the middle of the night,” he said. “You know how your brain can’t shut stuff off, or you’re just dreading going in the next day?” He was troubled by certain cases—a girl who had been abused in foster care, only to end up with a grandmother who stole her S.S.I. checks. He was also haunted by the need to reach case quotas, never explicitly stated but often implied. “Cutting corners happens in this industry, when representatives are trying to just get something off their list,” he said. “So then it’s like, ‘I got that done.’ But did you really help the person?” His latest sources of worry were a news article in which O’Malley, the former S.S.A. commissioner, predicted “system collapse and an interruption of benefits” within “thirty to ninety days” and an affidavit by a former agency official that described DOGE’s violation of privacy protocols and the likelihood of “critical errors that could upend SSA systems.”

Steven has never been a zealot for anything except his favorite football team, but now he believes that he and his co-workers are part of an “underground movement” to prevent the destruction of Social Security. Trump and Musk, and more conventional Republicans, talk obsessively about rooting out fraud at the S.S.A. Mistakes and overpayments do occur, but the agency’s inspector general recently found that less than one per cent of benefits distributed between 2015 and 2022 were improper. Steven believes that mass layoffs will

result in vulnerable Americans not getting the money they're entitled to. "We service people at their best and worst times," he said. "People heading into retirement, surviving spouses, widows, widowers. It used to be we'd get complaints from the public. We'd start off a call by apologizing. 'We're understaffed!' " Now, he went on, "people are apologizing to us." ♦

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*E. Tammy Kim is a contributing writer at *The New Yorker*.*