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January 21, 2014

Ms. Carolyn W. Colvin
Acting Commissioner of Social Security
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21235-0001

RE: Closure of Amherst, NY Social Security office

Dear Commissioner Colvin,

I write today to express my concern over the Social Security Administration's (SSA) recent proposal to close the Amherst, NY office, which I believe will create access barriers for seniors, students, and disabled residents of Western New York.

I am aware of the budget constraints the SSA has faced over the last several years, but I believe the closure of the Amherst office is both premature and unnecessary. In FY 2014, an additional \$11.7 billion has been appropriated to the SSA for administrative expenses in H.R. 3574, the Consolidated Appropriations Act. This will provide financial stability to SSA and alleviate the need to close field offices across the United States.

Presently, my district is home to approximately 180,000 beneficiaries of Social Security, of which 94,000 are retired, 29,000 disabled, and 31,000 low-income residents. The service area - which covers 296 sq. miles and has a population of 384,000- includes the towns and cities of Akron, Clarence, Getzville, Grand Island, Tonawanda, and Buffalo. By 2018, 18.7% of inhabitants are expected to be over the age of 65 and 33% over the age of 55. An increasing senior population demonstrates a greater need for an on-site facility in Amherst.

Logistically, I am concerned that the closure of the Amherst office will place residents of Northern and Eastern Erie County at a severe disadvantage. The justification released by the SSA, cited proximity of 9.3 miles between the Amherst and Buffalo office. However, the distance between two federal offices is irrelevant. SSA fails to take into account the distance individuals already have to travel. For example, if the Amherst office is closed, a resident of

Akron, NY would have to travel 25 miles for an appointment at the Buffalo office. This distance is not feasible for many of my constituents.

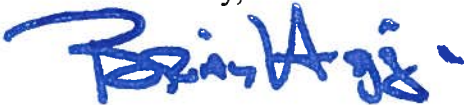
Furthermore, there is limited availability of public transportation for residents without means to travel by car. An inhabitant of the Beechwood Continuing Care facility, one of 17 nursing homes in the Amherst Service area, would have to travel over an hour by bus, train, and foot to reach the Buffalo Social Security office. With the closest NFTA metro bus stop a ¼ mile away. Elderly and disabled beneficiaries and employees would have tremendous difficulty traveling to appointments and work.

Additionally, the Amherst service area is home to both State University at New York at Buffalo campuses (UB). UB has a large and diverse international population comprising 17% of enrollment. These students are frequent visitors to the Social Security office to request Social Security Numbers (SSN) for on campus employment; or to receive SSN denial letters in order to obtain a New York State driver's license. The location of the Amherst office is perfectly situated between both UB campuses and the loss of this resource for the growing international student population would be significant.

Statistics show that Western New York offices are currently understaffed, making it difficult for the hardworking SSA employees to meet even the basic inquiries of citizens. The Amherst office has seen a 69% reduction in staffing over 20 years, but workload at this office remains high; in 2013 it processed over 32% of all retirement, survivors, and disability (RSDI) insurance claims in Erie County. Likewise, Medicare recipients have increased by 50%. Combining offices is not going to decrease the wait time for disabled and senior citizens but only exacerbate it.

Residents of Western New York have already experienced cutbacks in Social Security services with the closure of the Cheektowaga office in 2008. Western New Yorkers deserves quality service from the SSA and we must protect the delivery of this assistance for current and future beneficiaries.

Sincerely,



Brian Higgins
Member of Congress