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ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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April 17, 2025

Ms. Michelle L. Anderson
Assistant Inspector General for Audit
Performing the Duties of the Inspector General
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Boulevard, Suite 300
Baltimore, MD 21235

Dear Ms. Anderson,

I write to bring to your attention disturbing whistleblower information provided to the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Democratic staff (the Committee) indicating that the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) is putting at risk Social Security Administration (SSA) operations, Social Security benefits, and the sensitive personal data of all Americans. The whistleblower information obtained by the Committee, combined with public reporting, paints a picture of chaos at SSA as DOGE is rapidly, haphazardly, and unlawfully working to implement changes that could disrupt Social Security payments and expose Americans' sensitive data. I am providing this information to your office for immediate investigation. It is my hope that shedding sunlight on the opaque operations of DOGE at SSA will stop further damage to the agency and prevent a potentially calamitous disruption to the benefit payments that serve as a lifeline for more than 70 million Americans.

Based on the whistleblower information reported to the Committee, I have three primary concerns about how the Trump Administration and DOGE are putting SSA benefits and Americans' sensitive data at risk, particularly given the exceptionally careless approach that individuals associated with DOGE have shown thus far in managing federal information technology (IT) systems and handling sensitive data.[1]

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[1] *See e.g.*, Letter from Ranking Member Gerald E. Connolly, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, to 24 CFO Act Agencies (Mar. 12, 2025) (online at https://oversightdemocrats.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/democrats-oversight.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/2025-03-12-gec-to-24-agencies-re-doge-ai.pdf); Letter from Ranking Member Gerald E. Connolly, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, to Mr. Charles Ezell, Acting Director, Office of Personnel Management (Feb. 22, 2025) (online at https://oversightdemocrats.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/democrats-oversight.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/2025-02-22.GEC%20to%20OPM-%20Ezell%20re%20Musk%20Email.pdf); *DOGE Says it Needs to Know the Government's Most Sensitive Data, but Can't Say Why*, NPR (Mar. 26, 2025) (online at www.npr.org/2025/03/26/nx-s1-5339842/doge-data-access-privacy-act-social-security-treasury-opm-lawsuit).

1. **IT and Staff Disruption:** Recent changes to SSA IT infrastructure and staffing have already degraded operations, leaving beneficiaries unable to access basic services and potentially disrupting Social Security payments;[2]

2. **SSA 2.0:** DOGE reportedly plans to undertake a massive overhaul of SSA IT systems (referred to as "SSA 2.0") with almost no advanced planning or transparency; and[3]

3. **Master Database:** The DOGE team is reportedly engaged in an unprecedented effort to build a massive database using data from SSA and across the federal government, including the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and other agencies.[4]

During its short existence, DOGE has established a track record of extreme negligence and an alarmingly cavalier attitude with respect to protecting Americans' sensitive data.[5] DOGE has exfiltrated sensitive data to artificial intelligence (AI) companies that have not received proper vetting for use by the federal government, flouted federal data access controls, and exposed systems in both the Department of the Treasury and the Department of Energy's national security research labs to potential foreign attackers.[6] Even DOGE's official website lacked basic cybersecurity controls, leaving its database open for editing by any outside individual.[7] With such a track record, I have significant concerns that DOGE could cause

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[2] *Social Security Website Keeps Crashing, as DOGE Demands Cuts to IT Staff*, Washington Post (Apr. 7, 2025) (online at www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/04/07/social-security-website-crashes-musk-trump/).

[3] Communications with Committee Democratic Staff.

[4] Communications with Committee Democratic Staff.

[5] *See e.g.*, Letter from Ranking Member Gerald E. Connolly, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, to 24 CFO Act Agencies (Mar. 12, 2025) (online at https://oversightdemocrats.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/democrats-oversight.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/2025-03-12-gec-to-24-agencies-re-doge-ai.pdf); Letter from Ranking Member Gerald E. Connolly, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, to Mr. Charles Ezell, Acting Director, Office of Personnel Management (Feb. 22, 2025) (online at https://oversightdemocrats.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/democrats-oversight.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/2025-02-22.GEC%20to%20OPM-%20Ezell%20re%20Musk%20Email.pdf).

[6] Letter from Ranking Member Shontel Brown, Subcommittee on Cybersecurity, Information Technology, and Government Innovation, Ranking Member Melanie Stansbury, Subcommittee on Delivering on Government Efficiency, and Ranking Member Gerald E. Connolly, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, to President Donald Trump (Feb. 25, 2025) (online at https://oversightdemocrats.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/democrats-oversight.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/2025-02-25.%20GEC%20Brown%20Stansbury%20to%20President%20Trump%20re.%20DOGE%20Cyber%20Issues.pdf); Letter from Ranking Member Gerald E. Connolly, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, to 24 CFO Act Agencies (Mar. 12, 2025) (online at https://oversightdemocrats.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/democrats-oversight.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/2025-03-12-gec-to-24-agencies-re-doge-ai.pdf).

[7] *Anyone Can Push Updates to the DOGE.gov Website*, 404 Media (Feb. 14, 2025) (online at www.404media.co/anyone-can-push-updates-to-the-doge-gov-website-2); *Elon Musk Is Faking DOGE Results to Hide His Incompetence*, The New Republic (Feb. 19, 2025) (online at https://newrepublic.com/post/191707/elon-musk-fake-doge-savings-data).

irreparable damage to Social Security, particularly if allowed to operate in the dark, shielded from necessary oversight and transparency.

IT and Staff Disruption

The Trump Administration has reportedly eliminated approximately 7,000 positions at SSA. Recent reporting indicates that DOGE has demanded a 50% cut to the technology division that maintains the SSA website, benefits portals, and IT systems. The Trump Administration reportedly plans to fire an additional 25% of the employees who manage SSA's data systems. These attempted firings are occurring at a time when the SSA website is repeatedly crashing and beneficiaries are not able to log into their accounts or access their benefits information.[8]

At the same time, the Committee has learned that repeated IT failures are happening at SSA. For example, critical data collection batch jobs have failed.[9] Batch jobs are automated processes that run behind the scenes to handle large amounts of data, such as income, demographic, and financial information. These batch jobs are essential to keeping SSA operations running smoothly, as they help gather and process the data needed to calculate accurate benefit payments. SSA operates more than 3,000 interconnected systems that depend on these automated processes to work together properly. While occasional batch job failures can happen in any large organization, staffing cuts, especially in SSA's IT department, have reduced the agency's ability to fix these issues quickly. As a result, small, manageable problems can spiral into major disruptions. When batch jobs fail and are not fixed in time, it can delay or even stop payments to Social Security recipients. Unlike a social media app or an entertainment platform, SSA is a lifeline for millions of Americans. Widespread IT failures could mean seniors and others who rely on Social Security are left without the income they need to buy food, pay rent, heat their homes, afford medications, and more.

SSA 2.0

The Committee has also received information indicating that as part of the upheaval at SSA, the Trump Administration plans to rapidly rip out and replace critical IT systems without adequate planning and preparation. Committee Democrats have long supported modernization efforts, but ongoing bipartisan efforts and SSA's own prior analyses make clear that these projects will take significant time and require ample oversight, guardrails, and planning.[10]

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[8] *Social Security Website Keeps Crashing, as DOGE Demands Cuts to IT Staff*, Washington Post (Apr. 7, 2025) (online at www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/04/07/social-security-website-crashes-musk-trump/).

[9] Communications with Committee Democratic Staff.

[10] Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, *Press Release: Sessions and Mfume Send Bipartisan Letter Requesting GAO to Review Persistent Issues with DOD's Vetting System* (Dec. 16, 2024) (online at https://oversight.house.gov/release/sessions-and-mfume-send-bipartisan-letter-requesting-gao-to-review-persistent-issues-with-dods-vetting-system/); *DOGE Plans to Rebuild SSA Code Base in Months, Risking Benefits and System Collapse*, Wired (Mar. 28, 2025) (online at www.wired.com/story/doge-rebuild-social-security-administration-cobol-benefits/).

Many federal agencies continue to rely on Common Business-Oriented Language (COBOL), which was originally developed in the 1950s but remains in widespread government use including for processing critical services like tax payments, Social Security, and Medicare.[11] In 2017, SSA estimated that it would take approximately five years to modernize its systems and end its use of COBOL, in part because the underlying IT systems implemented in COBOL issue social security numbers, manage payments, and calculate the amount beneficiaries should receive for services.[12] In contrast to SSA's previously proposed five year IT modernization timeline, Committee Democrats have learned that SSA now plans to sunset and replace its COBOL systems with modern systems in a matter of weeks or months.[13]

Undertaking such a modernization effort over the course of mere weeks or months and with little advance preparation threatens to cause significant operational disruptions. Indeed, the use of antiquated systems is not unique to the federal government, and there are myriad stories of IT modernization failures where companies underestimated the complexity of such a task. A 2017 *Reuters* estimate found that there were more than 220 billion lines of COBOL still in use, and that COBOL systems handled more than $3 trillion in daily commerce, including 95% of all ATM card-swipes and 80% of all in-person credit card transactions. Migrations take years and frequently require significant operational disruptions that can include hundreds of millions of dollars in operational losses.[14]

I agree that the federal government needs to address legacy systems across agencies; however, successfully undertaking such a task requires significant organization and advanced planning, including congressionally appropriated funds and oversight of both execution and evaluation. Even moderate disruptions in Social Security payments and services would have catastrophic results for the approximately 70 million monthly beneficiaries who rely on Social Security to pay for daily necessities like food and housing.[15] In the time since DOGE began cutting staff at SSA, beneficiaries have already had to grapple with long telephone wait times and frequent website crashes when trying to contact the agency.[16]

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[11] *Social Security's COBOL Software Comes Under Scrutiny*, Newsweek (Feb. 18, 2025) (online at www.newsweek.com/social-security-cobol-software-doge-elon-musk-2032680#:~:text=Government%20agencies%20rely%20on%20COBOL,in%20redundancy%20and%20fault%20tolerance).

[12] *DOGE Plans to Rebuild SSA Code Base in Months, Risking Benefits and System Collapse*, Wired (Mar. 28, 2025) (online at www.wired.com/story/doge-rebuild-social-security-administration-cobol-benefits/).

[13] Communications with Committee Democratic Staff.

[14] *What Is COBOL, and Why Do So Many Institutions Rely on It?*, How To Geek (Apr. 15, 2020) (online at www.howtogeek.com/667596/what-is-cobol-and-why-do-so-many-institutions-rely-on-it/).

[15] *See* Social Security Administration, *Fact Sheet: Social Security* (online at www.ssa.gov/news/press/factsheets/basicfact-alt.pdf) (accessed Apr. 3, 2025); AARP, *Securing Our Future: The Importance of Social Security* (Oct. 10, 2024) (online at https://states.aarp.org/mississippi/securing-our-future-the-importance-of-social-security).

[16] *DOGE Plans to Rebuild SSA Code Base in Months, Risking Benefits and System Collapse*, Wired (Mar. 28, 2025) (online at www.wired.com/story/doge-rebuild-social-security-administration-cobol-benefits/).

Master Database

The Committee has also received reports about troubling, fumbling efforts by DOGE to combine sensitive information held by SSA, the IRS, HHS, and other agencies into a single cross-agency master database. Improving how federal agencies share data to improve outcomes and customer service is a longstanding and bipartisan goal in Congress. Information obtained by the Committee, however, indicates that DOGE is carrying out its work in a manner that disregards important cybersecurity and privacy considerations, potentially in violation of the law.

In an apparent attempt to sidestep network security controls, the Committee has learned that DOGE engineers have tried to create specialized computers for themselves that simultaneously give full access to networks and databases across different agencies.[17] Such a system would pose unprecedented operational security risks and undermine the zero-trust cybersecurity architecture that prevents a breach at one agency from spreading across the government.[18] Information obtained by the Committee also indicates that individuals associated with DOGE have assembled backpacks full of laptops, each with access to different agency systems, that DOGE staff is using to combine databases that are currently maintained separately by multiple federal agencies.[19]

Federal law places limits on how data collected by one federal agency can be shared with another. Under the Privacy Act, federal agencies must obtain written consent from individuals before disclosing certain data collected by them to another federal agency.[20] There are limited exceptions under which individually identifiable data may be transferred to another agency without prior written consent, and these exceptions typically require the releasing agency to publish and document this disclosure in the *Federal Register* or the requesting agency to submit a written request for the relevant records.[21] I am concerned that DOGE is moving personal information across agencies without the notification required under the Privacy Act or related laws, such that the American people are wholly unaware their data is being manipulated in this way.

I have long championed efforts to improve data sharing across the government to combat improper payments and to increase government efficiency. But any efforts to reform our current systems must be undertaken with the utmost sensitivity and concern for privacy, security, and the Social Security payments that millions of people rely on. I urge you to assess whether SSA has sufficient staffing to support the technology that SSA and Social Security beneficiaries rely on,

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[17] Communications with Committee Democratic Staff.

[18] Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, *Zero Trust Maturity Model* (Apr. 2023) (online at www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/2023-04/CISA_Zero_Trust_Maturity_Model_Version_2_508c.pdf).

[19] Communications with Committee Democratic Staff.

[20] 5 U.S.C. § 552a.

[21] 5 U.S.C. § 552a; Department of Justice, *Overview of the Privacy Act of 1974 (2020 Edition)* (online at www.justice.gov/Overview_2020/dl?inline). Federal agencies can transfer information to the Bureau of the Census, the National Archives and Records Administration, and the Government Accountability Office without publishing and documenting the disclosure or receiving a written request for the information. *Id*.

whether SSA has adequately prepared for the rapid transformation of its IT systems away from COBOL, and whether SSA is taking the necessary steps to protect sensitive information under the Privacy Act and related laws in compiling a master database of Americans' sensitive data. In conducting this assessment, I request that you address the following issues:

<u>Unauthorized or Improper Network and Data Access by DOGE Personnel</u>

1. Identify all SSA systems, networks, or databases to which individuals associated with DOGE have been granted access;

    a. Describe the type of data contained in each system, including whether it contains personally identifiable information (PII), Social Security numbers, financial records, and/or protected health information; and

    b. Provide documentation showing the legal or policy justification for such access.

2. Evaluate the process by which DOGE personnel were granted access to SSA systems, including;

    a. The statutory or regulatory authority relied upon;

    b. The identity and role of approving officials;

    c. The duration of such access and revocation mechanisms; and

    d. Any deviations from standard SSA access protocols.

3. Assess whether adequate security controls were implemented prior to and during DOGE personnel access, including;

    a. Background checks or clearance requirements;

    b. Role-based access controls; and

    c. Logging, auditing, or real-time monitoring of DOGE-associated activity.

<u>Data Alteration and Integration</u>

4. Determine whether DOGE personnel have altered, deleted, or restructured any SSA datasets, systems of record, or databases.

    a. Identify any such alterations, the date and method of change, and the systems affected.

5.   Identify any efforts by DOGE to aggregate SSA data with data from other federal agencies to create a "master database."

     a.   Document which datasets have been combined, the justification for such integration, and the identity of participating agencies.

6.   Provide all relevant memoranda of understanding, interagency agreements, or informal arrangements between SSA and other federal entities facilitating DOGE's data activities.

7.   Assess whether DOGE has taken any actions to validate the accuracy of third-party or interagency data incorporated into SSA systems.

Cybersecurity Oversight and Compliance

8.   Identify the cybersecurity policies, standards, and best practices that DOGE is required to comply with while operating within SSA systems.

     a.   Assess whether DOGE has adhered to SSA, federal, and FISMA-related cybersecurity requirements.

9.   Evaluate the mechanisms used by DOGE and SSA to ensure cybersecurity compliance, including:

     a.   Internal audits, security assessments, incident response protocols, and third-party evaluations.

Privacy Act Compliance and Legal Risk

10.   Identify any transfers of data subject to the Privacy Act between SSA and other federal agencies in which DOGE personnel were involved.

     a.   Determine whether such transfers complied with applicable law, including Privacy Act routine use exemptions, disclosure rules, and notice requirements.

11.   Review SSA's internal oversight and controls to ensure that DOGE-related data transfers did not result in unauthorized disclosure of protected records.

COBOL Modernization and Benefit Processing

12.   Assess DOGE's involvement in SSA's efforts to phase out COBOL and modernize benefit-processing systems.

     a.   Identify any project plans, anticipated timelines, and safeguards to prevent service interruptions.

13. Determine whether any disruptions in benefit processing or IT service availability have occurred as a result of DOGE-led modernization efforts.

Staffing, Service Disruptions, and Operational Failures

14. Identify all SSA IT, cybersecurity, or systems integrity positions that have been eliminated or left vacant since January 20, 2025.

   a. Evaluate the impact of these staffing changes on SSA's operational capacity and risk posture.

15. Investigate the cause of repeated outages affecting the SSA website in early April 2025.

   a. Determine whether DOGE personnel or related system changes contributed to these service disruptions.

16. Review SSA's batch processing systems and recent batch job failures.

   a. Compare key performance metrics—such as average detection and remediation times—before and after January 20, 2025.

   b. Evaluate whether DOGE-related changes have contributed to performance degradation.

The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform is the principal oversight committee of the House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate "any matter" at "any time" under House Rule X. Full compliance with our requests is necessary, in part to determine whether legislative reforms are needed to ensure the continued security of our federal government systems and privacy of federal employees' sensitive personnel data. If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact Committee Democratic staff at (202) 225-5051. Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Gerald E. Connolly
Ranking Member

cc: The Honorable James Comer, Chairman