

JASON SMITH  
MISSOURI,  
CHAIRMAN

MARK ROMAN, STAFF DIRECTOR  
(202) 225-3625



RICHARD E. NEAL  
MASSACHUSETTS,  
RANKING MEMBER

BRANDON CASEY, STAFF DIRECTOR  
(202) 225-4021

## U.S. House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS  
1139 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING  
Washington, DC 20515

May 29, 2024

The Honorable Janet L. Yellen  
Secretary  
Department of the Treasury  
1500 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20220

The Honorable Martin O'Malley  
Commissioner  
Social Security Administration  
6401 Security Boulevard  
Baltimore, MD 21235

Dear Secretary Yellen and Commissioner O'Malley,

Nearly 4 million seniors, survivors, and people with disabilities receive Social Security or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits from the Social Security Administration (SSA) through a Direct Express debit card. SSA benefits are a critical source of income, and for many beneficiaries, are their only source of income. When problems with a Direct Express card arise, beneficiaries who have difficulties resolving their problems can be left without their SSA income. We urge you to address longstanding customer service deficiencies at Direct Express, so that problems can be prevented and quickly resolved.

Social Security and SSI provide essential income for more than 70 million Americans. Monthly payments administered by SSA help beneficiaries and their families to put food on the table, keep a roof over their heads, pay medical bills, and secure other basics. Social Security and SSI benefits are particularly important for people of color and women, who on average have fewer resources to fall back on in retirement or in the event of a sudden and severe disability, and for

children. It is impossible to overstate the importance of these SSA programs to the American people – or the dire consequences if people are unable to access their benefits.

Treasury operates the Direct Express program to provide an electronic payment option for people who receive Federal benefits, but lack a bank account – including Social Security and SSI beneficiaries. Treasury established the Direct Express program pursuant to the Debt Collection Improvement Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-134), which requires recurring Federal payments, including SSA benefits, to be paid by electronic fund transfer. SSA beneficiaries make up more than 98 percent of Direct Express customers.

Many users report satisfaction with their Direct Express card. However, problems can arise, such as if a Direct Express card is lost or damaged, if a card is stolen or used fraudulently, or if a beneficiary is unable to activate a new or replacement card.

We have been alarmed by reports of cases in which beneficiaries struggle to resolve problems with their Direct Express cards. For example, complaints filed with the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) include many reports by SSA beneficiaries who tried to reach Direct Express customer assistance but had to call back repeatedly and wait on hold for hours; who were unable to remedy their problems even after they reached an agent; and who received no follow-up communication.

Alarming, many seniors and people with disabilities reported being left unable to access their SSA benefits – in some cases, for months – because of problems with their Direct Express cards. In some situations, individuals with intractable problems closed out their Direct Express accounts – but reported to the CFPB that the funds left in their Direct Express accounts had become stuck and neither could be spent nor transferred out.


In addition, when beneficiaries are unable to solve their problems by contacting Direct Express, they often call SSA or visit one of its local field offices. Unfortunately, Direct Express currently provides SSA with only very limited options for the agency to contact its debit card customer service to help SSA beneficiaries remedy persistent problems. SSA's mission is to ensure that eligible people receive their benefits. It should be able to work with customers and Direct Express agents together, to facilitate resolution of persistent problems in real-time so that beneficiaries can access their SSA payments without further delay. We are confident that the current options do not allow for the level of customer service that SSA would like to provide to people who are unable to access their benefits, even after contacting Direct Express.

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For these reasons, we ask that you improve Direct Express customer service so that seniors, survivors, and people with disabilities can be assured access to their SSA benefits. We urge Treasury and SSA to work together to enhance Direct Express – both to prevent problems from happening in the first place and to ensure that when problems arise, they get resolved as quickly as possible. SSA beneficiaries have a right to high-quality customer service, especially in this situation where their access to basic income depends on it.

Sincerely,



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John B. Larson  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Social Security



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Danny K. Davis  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Worker and Family Support



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Bill Pascrell, Jr.  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Oversight