Re: Inconsistent Service by Social Security Administration offices in the Greater New York Metropolitan Area

Dear Senators Schumer and Gillibrand, and Representatives Maloney, Nadler, and Espaillat,

On behalf of the undersigned officials from New York institutions of higher education I would like to bring to your attention struggles our international students and scholars have experienced in trying to apply for a Social Security Number (SSN) over the past several months, and kindly request your assistance in securing a solution.

We are Principal Designated School Officials (PDSOs) at New York area universities serving a combined 75,000+ international students and scholars who hail from over 120 countries, represent up to one-third of university student enrollment, and bring millions of dollars in revenue to the New York Metropolitan Area each year. We work tirelessly to maintain the SEVIS database for the Department of Homeland Security while also ensuring our students understand and comply with federal F-1 and J-1 immigration regulations. In any given semester, we will assist thousands of students in applying for an SSN.

As you may be aware, international students are required by the Social Security Administration (SSA) to apply for an SSN in person. They must present their immigration documents, proof of employment, and a letter signed by the university International Student and Scholars office. However, starting March 20, 2020, during Governor Cuomo’s New York State on PAUSE plan, area SSA offices closed for in-person services. Ever since, there has been a paralyzing lack of consistency regarding whether or not Social Security Offices in the New York Metropolitan area are open for in-person services. Although the state has allowed these offices to re-open on a limited basis, our students and scholars are still not able to visit them to obtain an SSN, something students in other states are simply not experiencing.

Over the past several months, we have regularly called various offices in the five boroughs for updates to no avail. Combined, our schools have had approximately fewer than 10 students able to secure SSN appointments since March. Some students have been able to get an appointment simply by calling the
right office at the right time. One student called the office in Jamaica, Queens and was told to fax her documents first, and then they gave her an appointment. Another student called the SSA office in Yonkers; the representative there was very helpful and contacted the Manhattan card center on her behalf to get an appointment. It seems that students have completely different experiences depending on which offices they call and what representatives they speak to. We as DSOs have resorted to telling students to be persistent, call various SSA offices, and try their best wherever they can to make headway.

In consideration of this ongoing and inconsistent service by the SSA, we kindly ask for your assistance. Especially during this pandemic, our students need consistent, secure, and easy means to obtain SSNs for whatever paying employment or practical training positions they have secured. Additionally, if students do not get the SSA card issued in this calendar year, it will result in complications and issues for them next year when they need to file their tax returns.

Thank you for your kind attention and assistance on behalf of thousands of international students and scholars and the many dedicated higher education professionals throughout the New York Metropolitan Area who serve them.

Sincerely,

Jim Deleppo, PDSO, The New School

Yocasta Brens, PDSO, Teachers College, Columbia University
Thomas Sirinides, PDSO, New York University
Erika Rohrbach, PDSO, Fashion Institute of Technology, SUNY

cc: President Dwight A. McBride; President Andrew D. Hamilton, New York University; President Joyce F. Brown, Fashion Institute of Technology; President Thomas R. Bailey, Teacher’s College