

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

August 15, 2022

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G St. NW
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro,

We sincerely appreciate the work you and the entire team at the Government Accountability Office (GAO) do to help make government work better for the American people. Since its inception, the GAO has proved to be a crucial partner in the work Congress has undertaken to make America more fair, equal, and free.

Recently, one particular issue that has continued to come up in our conversations with constituents has been the enormous amount of time and energy that low- and middle- income Americans have to spend navigating administrative requirements and paperwork when dealing with federal agencies. We're hopeful that with your partnership, we can help find ways for these folks to spend less time dealing with the government and more time with their families and communities.

Throughout our time in Congress, our offices have heard from thousands of constituents seeking help dealing with the maze-like procedural hurdles that ordinary people must navigate to get the support and resources to which they are legally entitled. Moms struggling to get nutrition assistance to feed their kids. Folks who have lost their jobs but who can't get unemployment insurance. Working families trying to access affordable housing resources. Applying for these programs often involves navigating confusing websites, filling out extensive paperwork, and answering often invasive and confusing questions. When people fall into crisis, have a child with complex medical needs, develop a disability, or take on the care and administrative work for an aging parent, they have to become their own advocate in the confusing system of social program bureaucracy.

For far too many Americans – and particularly for vulnerable citizens – dealing with the federal government and federally funded state social programs often consumes valuable time, energy, and resources. One person experiencing poverty put it this way for Washington Governor Jay Inslee's Poverty Reduction Work Group: "Most of the time I am like, what's the secret handshake? How do I navigate this to get what I need? The burden of figuring out the system is on the people being served ... it's a full-time job."

Last summer, journalist Annie Lowrey of *The Atlantic* coined a new term - the “time tax” - to characterize the time that Americans spend each year fighting with their own government’s bureaucracy.

In her July 2021 article, Lowrey conveys that the “time tax” Americans face when they interact with the federal government does not fall equitably upon all citizens. Rather, the time tax disproportionately affects the poorest and most socioeconomically disadvantaged members of our society who are seeking assistance from programs that aid with nutrition assistance, housing subsidies, and education and child care assistance - including the Supplemental Nutrition Security Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC), Section 8 Housing vouchers, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) transfers. According to Lowrey, all of these programs require lengthy application paperwork, continuing verification paperwork, and – for a few programs – in person interviews before aid will be approved. For most poor and vulnerable Americans, these application procedures can take enormous amounts of time every month to keep on top of, and one mistake can result in cancellation of benefits with little advance notice. But the failure of government to work optimally for the people it serves does not stop at the poverty line. All Americans face the time tax, whether as a small business owner waiting months for an SBA loan application decision, or a veteran trying to navigate VA services.

In Congress we have and will continue to work in a bipartisan way to find ways to make government work better for our constituents. The “time tax” is a failure of the federal government on this front. The economy can’t work well when small business owners can’t get the SBA assistance they need. The economy can’t work well when parents are spending hours and hours worrying about whether they’ll be able to feed their children because they might have made a small mistake on their income verification forms for SNAP. The economy can’t work well when hardworking Americans have to spend hours on hold with the IRS trying to get their own money back from the government. When the government doesn’t work well for the people it serves, it holds the whole economy back from growing as fast as it should. To this end, we were pleased to hear that President Biden signed an executive order on the “time tax” on December 13th, directing federal agencies to improve the “customer experience” for Americans interacting with the federal government. Additionally, the President’s Management Agenda includes as a key priority, Delivering Excellent, Equitable, and Secure Federal Services and Customer Experience. Among other strategies, it tasks the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to improve the service design, digital products, and customer-experience management of Federal High-Impact Service Providers by reducing customer burden, addressing inequities, and streamlining processes.¹

We are requesting that GAO undertake a review or series of reviews of the efforts of the federal government to improve constituent facing agency operations. Specifically, we would like GAO to address the following questions related to federal customer experience and administrative burden:

1. How is OMB working with the General Services Administration to implement strategies related to improving customer experience across the federal government? In addition,

have any agencies taken specific actions to comply with the executive order mentioned above?

2. To what extent have those agencies that have the highest number of Americans utilizing their services, including those agencies that oversee broadly used programs administered at the local level (e.g. SNAP, TANF, WIC), taken actions to improve federal customer experience and service delivery for the public?
3. To what extent has data and guidance been developed on service delivery of customer life experiences at selected agencies? For example, some programs require eligibility paperwork to be submitted on paper via the mail, or eligibility appointments to occur in-person, which could be a barrier for some families.
4. What steps are selected agencies taking to reduce the paperwork burden on the public, and in particular, the burden on underserved and marginalized communities? For example, are agencies factoring in the time it takes to fill out a proposed new form and are they also accounting for the time it costs to collect the information needed to fill out that form (e.g. health care history) and to provide any additional documentation (collecting health care records)? Furthermore, are selected agencies collaborating (via policy changes and secure data sharing) in order to find ways to reduce the paperwork burden on the public? Are agencies hiring specific Customer Experience specialists to work towards this goal or relying on internal staff?
5. What challenges do agencies face in addressing OMB's guidance mentioned above to more completely and transparently articulate burdens and associated costs experienced by the public when accessing essential public benefits programs? Are there specific statutory, regulatory, or executive orders that pose barriers to policy changes?
6. How could agencies then use this analysis to minimize the "Time Tax", with particular emphasis on those individuals and entities most adversely affected, consistent with the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995?
7. In GAO's opinion, could a "common application" be one potential tool used with the goal of providing Americans with convenient access to multiple services that are needed by people experiencing poverty, a unified cap on total benefits, and a unified taper to reduce total benefits gradually as employment income increases? What barriers, statutory, regulatory, or otherwise, exist in relation to a common application for social safety net programs?

Government needs to work better – for children growing up in poverty, for disabled veterans, and for all Americans. We appreciate your prompt attention to this matter – and look forward to working with you to get government working better for the folks we represent.

Sincerely,



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Member of Congress



Dan Newhouse
Member of Congress



Kathleen Rice
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