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February 27, 2012

Honorable Commissioner Michael J. Astrue
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21235

Dear Commissioner Astrue:

I am writing to express concerns about access to hearings for claimants in southwest Colorado who have filed appeals for Social Security disability benefits and to advocate for the agency's use of video hearings in Durango as a viable alternative to alleviate those concerns.

The Social Security Administration recently closed a temporary remote hearing site in Durango, and I am concerned about the subsequent hardships faced by individuals waiting for hearings with an administrative law judge. In 2011 Social Security announced the planned closure of 60 temporary remote hearing sites due to budgetary pressures, and the site in Durango was included. At the time, my office raised concerns to the Regional Management Office about the possibility of delayed decisions for benefits due to the travel that would now be required in order to meet in-person with a judge. It is my understanding that the closest site for in-person hearings is in Colorado Springs, which is approximately a six-hour drive from this region in Colorado. When the Denver Social Security Office held hearings in Durango, it did not hold any between November and April due to concerns about weather and travel over mountain passes. Now, because of the closure, residents of Southwest Colorado are forced to make the same trip if their hearings occur during the winter months. These citizens deserve a hearing without unreasonable burdens placed on them.

As you know, many people waiting for disability hearings are ill and have been waiting a long time to have their cases heard. These citizens are often among the most physically and economically distressed individuals in our society making the long travel distance even more burdensome.

I support your agency's work to decrease the backlog of disability claims by using video teleconferencing technology to conduct hearings. With the site in Durango no longer being used as a face-to-face hearing site, I would like to urge consideration of the use of video hearings in Durango. There are at least two viable options for video hearings in Durango. Video conference facilities are offered at Fort Lewis College, which has displayed strong community spirit and has generously indicated it would be willing to provide its state-of-the-art facilities for this use. Should that option not work, the use of a remote hearing site at the Social Security office in Farmington, New Mexico for video teleconference hearings with the Office of Disability Adjudication and Review in Albuquerque may be an option. Farmington is located about one hour from Durango. As your agency is currently spending significant amounts of money for

travel reimbursements for claimants and their representatives, either of these options could also offer significant cost savings for the Social Security Administration while providing better service to the people of southwest Colorado.

Thank you for your consideration of this request to improve hearings accessibility for my constituents in southwestern Colorado. I look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure that disability claims are processed in the most timely and cost-efficient manner possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Michael F. Bennet". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "M" and a stylized "B".

Michael F. Bennet