

Social Security unveils new online application

- By JIM ABRAMS
- Associated Press writer
- Published: Jan 6, 2009

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The Social Security Administration, envisaging the near-future prospect of 10,000 baby boomers applying for benefits every day, has put together a new online service that will allow people to get their benefits without ever traveling to a Social Security field office.

The agency, in introducing the program Tuesday, said most people will be able to apply for their retirement or disability benefits in 15 minutes or less.

Academy Award-winning actress Patty Duke, spokeswoman for the Retire Online campaign, acknowledged that her own computer skills "are wanting." But her husband gave her a demonstration "and I was able to do it with my limited skills. It was very user-friendly," she said in an interview Monday.

The administration is betting that a great majority of baby boomers, the first to grow old in the computer age, will share that opinion.

"We have nearly 80 million baby boomers coming in," Social Security Commissioner Michael J. Astrue told The Associated Press. "We just don't have the infrastructure to handle that workload in the traditional fashion."

The agency estimates that the baby boom generation will become eligible for retirement at a rate of 10,000 a day for the next 20 years.

The Social Security system already faces a long-term financial crisis as fewer workers finance the retirements of more senior citizens. In 2008, it was paying out some \$614 billion to 50 million retirees and their dependents, disabled workers and survivors.

The agency has had versions of online applications since 2000, but in the past applicants have still had to mail or deliver paper documents with their signatures and copies of birth certificates or W-2 forms. In the future, the process should be paperless in the majority of cases.

"We redid it from scratch. It's easier to use, it's faster," Astrue said. He said it now takes about 45 minutes for a field officer to finish an application form for a person who visits a Social Security office.

David Certner, AARP's legislative policy director, said the new program was "a nice tool, particularly as more people are more comfortable with using the computer and the Internet."

But he cautioned that there is still a fairly large portion of the population that is not computer literate, and "we don't want it to substitute for the ability to deal with a real person."

Astrue gave assurances that people with more complicated applications or questions can still call the agency or visit a field office.

Duke, who at 62 is part of the coming baby boomer wave of retirees, made several public service announcements promoting the online program. One is a takeoff of the 1960s sitcom The Patty Duke Show, on which Duke played both teenagers Patty and her identical cousin Cathy. In the ad, the harried Patty is trying to gather paperwork for her retirement benefits application while the calm Cathy advises her of the ease of applying online.

The agency also plans to run full-page ads in USA Today and several news magazines.

Those wanting to use the new program can go to <http://www.socialsecurity.gov> and click on "Applying Online for Retirement Benefits."