



FRIDAY ALERT



Alliance for Retired Americans

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February 4, 2022

The Alliance and the AFL-CIO Celebrate Black History Month, Lunar New Year

"We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now," **Martin Luther King Jr.** famously said.

Since February 1 was both the Lunar New Year — also known as the Chinese New Year — and the first day of Black History Month, the Alliance joins the AFL-CIO in taking this opportunity to note that the Black and Asian American communities have worked proudly together for working people and for civil rights for many years.

"Corporate power players have historically taken control most easily when allies in the labor and civil rights movements fight amongst ourselves," said **Robert Roach, Jr.**, President of the Alliance. "Do not fall into their trap when our political opponents [attempt to divide us with their misleading rhetoric.](#)"

As Team AFL-CIO noted earlier this week, **Frederick Douglass** spoke against [anti-Chinese immigration policies](#); **Grace Lee Boggs** fought for [civil and worker rights and helped organize Black autoworkers in Detroit](#) for more than 60 years; and Asian organizers created [Letters for Black Lives](#) to talk about anti-Blackness with Asian families in their own language.

"There has never been a more appropriate time than now to remember that our fight for justice will be shared until the day we are all free," President Roach stated.

Medicare to Pay for Home Covid Tests

On Thursday the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) announced plans to make over-the-counter (OTC) COVID-19 tests available to people with Medicare at no cost by "early spring."

CMS's initial OTC testing policy applied to private insurers but not Medicare. However, the **Biden** Administration has changed the law to allow Medicare to provide coverage for at-home COVID-19 tests. Under the new initiative, Medicare beneficiaries will be able to access up to eight over-the-counter COVID-19 tests per month for free. Tests will be available through eligible pharmacies and other participating entities.

"This will be the first time that Medicare has covered an over-the-counter test at no cost to beneficiaries," said **Joseph Peters, Jr.**, Secretary-Treasurer of the Alliance. "The pandemic has led to many changes in our lives, and this policy change is definitely a positive step for seniors."

Once the initiative is up and running, CMS will encourage beneficiaries to ask their local pharmacy or current health care provider whether they are participating in this initiative. Answers to frequently asked questions, including options for getting free Covid tests now, before the change takes effect, are available [here](#).

Florida Alliance's Lawsuit Against the State's Restrictive Voting Law Goes to Court

Witness [testimony began](#) Monday in a lawsuit challenging the state of Florida's restrictive voting law. The Florida Alliance is a plaintiff in the suit, which is being held by teleconference due to the pandemic.

Florida Governor **Ron DeSantis** [signed a sweeping voter suppression bill](#) on May 6, 2021 that restricts access to the ballot box for millions of voters. As soon as the legislation was signed into law, the Florida Alliance, the League of Women Voters of Florida, the Black Voters Matter Fund and several individual Florida voters filed a lawsuit challenging it against the state of Florida and every county election board.

The lawsuit challenges specific provisions in the bill that:

- Impose restrictions on drop boxes voters use to return mail ballots;
- Effectively ban organizations and volunteers from helping voters return their mail ballots;
- Require voters to request mail ballots more frequently; and
- Ban any non-poll worker from giving food or drink, including water, to voters waiting in line to vote.

"We've been waiting to get our day in court," said **Bill Sauers**, President of the Florida Alliance. "This law will make it more difficult for millions of Florida citizens to exercise their constitutional right to vote, and it is unnecessary. Older Floridians take the right to vote seriously, and we will fight any attempt to keep our voices from being heard at the ballot box."

Florida is one of 19 states that enacted legislation in 2021 that suppresses voting rights.

COVID-19 Widows Struggle to Get Survivors Benefits as Social Security Offices Remain Closed

In addition to causing pain, misery and death to millions of infected Americans, the coronavirus pandemic has forced Social Security offices to close in-person operations, and many children and spouses are experiencing [long delays](#) in processing their survivor benefit claims. More than 90 percent of those seeking survivor benefits are women.

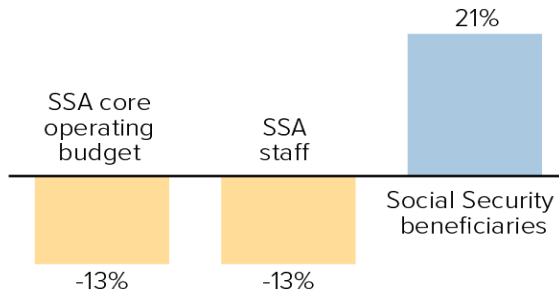
To help alleviate the problem, the Social Security Administration (SSA) is expanding a vital pandemic service to taxpayers that it had restricted to just one hour a day, [allowing drop boxes at its closed field offices to accept sensitive documents and forms](#) for more hours as it works toward opening some facilities.

"The combination of SSA's severe underfunding and the pandemic have been enormous hurdles to overcome," said **Richard Fiesta**, Executive Director of the Alliance. "Congress can help SSA address these challenges with sufficient funding that allows a smooth reopening when it is safe to

do so. SSA's work force is doing all they can under very difficult circumstances and the additional funding would certainly be put to good use."

Social Security Administration Faces Increased Workload With Fewer Resources

Percent change from 2010 to 2021 (funding adjusted for inflation)



Note: For beneficiaries, figures reflect fiscal year 2010 to Sept. 2021; for staff, between fiscal years 2010 and 2020. These data do not incorporate additional funding from the legislative response to COVID-19.

Source: CBPP analysis based on Social Security Administration and Office of Management and Budget

CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES | CBPP.ORG

According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the House-passed appropriations bill for the departments of Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services would boost SSA's funding by 9 percent over last year, while the Senate version would provide an 8 percent increase — less than the [10 percent](#) increase proposed in President Biden's 2022 budget.

KHN: Pandemic-Fueled Shortages of Home Health Workers Strand Patients Without Necessary Care

By Judith Graham

Frail older adults are finding it harder than ever to get paid help amid acute staff shortages at home health agencies.



Janine Hunt-Jackson of Lockport, New York, is authorized to receive 35 hours of home-based care each week. When an aide left in June, she tried to hire someone else. "I couldn't find anybody reliable," she said, and turned instead to her 24-year-old grandson for help. (JOSEPH SCHUMACHER)

Several trends are fueling the shortages: Hospitals and other employers are hiring away home health workers with better pay and benefits. Many aides have fallen ill or been exposed to covid-19 during the recent surge of omicron cases and must quarantine for a time. And staffers are burned out after working during the pandemic in difficult, anxiety-provoking circumstances.

The implications for older adults are dire. Some seniors who are ready for discharge are waiting in hospitals or rehabilitation centers for several days before home care services can be arranged. Some are

returning home with less help than would be optimal. Some are experiencing cutbacks in services. And some simply can't find care.

Read more [here](#).

The Alliance for Retired Americans is a national organization that advocates for the rights and well-being of over 4.4 million retirees and their families.