

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Jeff Merkley
Senate Budget Committee Hearing: “Social Security: A Discussion on the Facts and the Path Forward”
March 25, 2026

Sen. Merkley’s remarks, as prepared for delivery follow:

Mr. Chairman:

Thank you for holding today’s hearing.

In 1935, President Roosevelt told the nation in a Fireside Chat: “Provisions for social security are protections for the future.”

Today, about half of elderly households rely on Social Security for at least half of their income. And 20 percent of Americans over age 50 have no retirement savings at all. Meaning that Social Security is these seniors’ only protection from a life of poverty.

But provisions for Social Security’s future are in jeopardy.

According to independent estimates by the Social Security Administration and the Congressional Budget Office, the Social Security retirement trust fund will be insolvent by 2032. That’s just six years from now – or a single Senate term.

If that happens, benefits will be slashed between 23 and 28 percent.

Every month, approximately 68 million Americans open their mailbox or bank account to get their Social Security benefits. That includes 940,000 Oregonians, nearly 200,000 of whom would live in poverty without Social Security.

If Social Security benefits are cut, those folks can’t afford to lose the equivalent of 25 cents off every dollar. These are seniors who paid into Social Security their entire careers and deserve the full benefits they earned.

But the two laws governing Social Security payments are in direct tension with one another.

One law says that Social Security must pay full benefits to enrollees.

But the other law says that Social Security can only pay benefits with the funds it has.

So, either Social Security will have to cut benefits, in violation of the law, or Social Security will have to borrow additional funds, in violation of the law, which is a problem with two unworkable outcomes that is entirely avoidable.

There are many ideas for how to strengthen Social Security solvency.

Two of our Senate colleagues will share their ideas today, in addition to testimony from several experts.

The American people have ideas and priorities, too.

Every year, I hold a town hall in each of Oregon's 36 counties. I've held 20 town halls so far this year where I've asked Oregonians to fill out a survey about how they would make Social Security solvent.

The results have been clear and consistent across red, purple, and blue counties, from big cities to rural communities.

When asked how to save Social Security, a top response is raising the cap on Social Security contributions.

Folks think it's unfair that a local firefighter and a billionaire hedge fund manager have the exact same contribution cap of \$184,500 because they know the firefighter will pay a much bigger slice of their family's income than the hedge fund manager ever will.

In 1983, when Congress passed Social Security reforms, 90 percent of Americans' collective earnings were subject to Social Security payroll taxes.

That was projected to keep the trust fund solvent for 75 years – into the 2050s.

Over the last four decades, though, wealth inequality has exploded but the contribution caps mean that that payments into the trust fund haven't kept up with the highest earners' income growth.

So, the trust fund will run out of money more than 20 years sooner than was projected in 1983.

Raising the contribution cap is a clear, simple, bipartisan fix that voters support.

Another top response from folks at my town halls is making investment income subject to Social Security tax.

For the wealthiest Americans – hedge fund owners and billionaire investors – most of their income often comes from investments that currently aren't subject to the Social Security tax.

Folks agree that they should pay the same proportion of their income into Social Security as every other worker.

That's another clear, simple, commonsense fix that voters support.

President Trump has a powerful role to play in saving Social Security.

Just a few weeks ago, he said in his State of the Union address that he, quote: “will always protect Social Security.”

The President is supposed to release his budget for Fiscal Year 2027 soon.

In his budget, the President should lay out his plan to protect Social Security from the looming 23 percent cut in benefits that’s just six years away.

That looming cut in benefits was accelerated by his Big, Ugly Betrayal Law, which took nearly \$170 billion out of the Social Security trust fund that otherwise would have paid seniors their benefits.

That’s according to the Social Security actuary, who is joining us today.

President Trump has a responsibility to put forward a proposal that will fix this for seniors. He also has a responsibility to make sure seniors can access the benefits they’ve earned.

But President Trump’s reckless DOGE cuts have created all kinds of barriers for seniors trying to access their Social Security benefits.

Each of us here have members of our teams who work full time helping our constituents with federal programs and services.

My Constituent Services team reports that when Oregonians call the Social Security Administration’s 800-number, they have to wait one to six hours to get help.

Wait times at field offices can stretch between two and four hours. And that’s with an appointment that had to be scheduled two to three months ahead of time. And applications to get benefits that should be processed in 30 days are taking up to 90 days or longer.

All because DOGE fired thousands of Social Security Administration employees.

This is unacceptable – and the President needs to put forward a plan to fix it.

Finally, I want to note that our current deficits are at 6 percent of GDP, which is higher than the nation has ever had outside of a recession or major war.

We could close a full quarter of that deficit by making Social Security solvent!

President Roosevelt said that: “Provisions for social security are protections for the future.”

Congress needs to grapple right now with how we will provide for Social Security to protect that future.

I look forward to today’s discussion.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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