What Social Security Isn't Meant to Do

To hear some in Congress tell it, the federal government urgently needs to expand its electronic employment verification system, E-Verify, to all corners of the country and force every business to use it. But a hearing in the House last week raised serious questions about the costs and collateral damage of that expansion, the latest scheme by hard-liners to slam the door shut on unauthorized immigrant workers.

E-Verify is a voluntary program in which employers can check workers' names against databases kept by the Social Security Administration and the Department of Homeland Security. About 61,000 employers have signed up. A bill by Heath Shuler, a North Carolina Democrat, and Tom Tancredo, the Republican anti-immigration extremist from Colorado, would require each of the 7.4 million employers in the United States to participate in E-Verify — and to fire anyone, citizen or otherwise, who cannot prove that he or she has the right to work.

Barbara Kennelly, a former Democratic representative from Connecticut and president of the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare, warned at the hearing that forcing Social Security to take on the enormous burden of immigration enforcement would be a harmful diversion from its core mission and could strain the bureaucracy to the breaking point.

That would have frightening implications for millions of people who are supposed to be served by the Social Security Administration, particularly the elderly and those who are disabled. With Social Security struggling to provide existing services and the sunset of the baby boom approaching, Ms. Kennelly said, now is no time to pile on more responsibilities. The backlog of pending disability cases at the initial level is more than 500,000, and more than 750,000 people who have appealed rejected claims are awaiting decisions. As of February, the average wait on an appeal was more than 500 days.

Critics have noted other problems with the bill: the staggering costs to the federal budget — about $40 billion over 10 years, both from increased spending and falling tax revenue as workers are driven off the books — as well as the expense to businesses and the inconvenience and pain for workers caught by its flaws. Because the Social Security database is rotten with errors, the crackdown could force millions of Americans to battle a computerized bureaucracy that tells them, unjustly, that they cannot work. And the Government Accountability Office has cited evidence of employers abusing E-Verify, forcing workers who are tentatively flagged as unauthorized to take pay cuts or work longer hours until they can clear their names.

Supporters of Mr. Shuler's and Mr. Tancredo's hard-edged immigrant-deportation strategy have been pushing to get their bill to the floor. With any luck, testimony from experts like Ms. Kennelly will raise enough alarms to slow things down. If and when the government imposes a national employment verification scheme, it must be done with a serious commitment to fairness and accuracy, with ample protections for workers who fall into bureaucratic cracks, and for all who depend on the government to provide other critical services.

Such a system cannot be imposed without other immigration reforms, including a path to legalization for undocumented workers who would otherwise be pushed permanently into the shadows by a plan that gives them no way to work or to get right with the law.