

Congressional Response Report

The Social Security Administration's
Field Office Customer Service

OIG

Office of the Inspector General
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

July 14, 2020

The Honorable John B. Larson
Chair, Subcommittee on
Social Security
Committee on Ways and Means
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Subcommittee Chair Larson:

In a November 6, 2019 letter, you asked that the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) review access and wait times for people seeking assistance from, and problem resolution through, the Social Security Administration's field offices and telephone services.

My office is committed to combating fraud, waste, and abuse in the Agency's operations and programs. Thank you for bringing your concerns to my attention. The report highlights various facts pertaining to the issues raised in your letter related to field office customer wait times. To ensure the Agency is aware of the information provided to your office, the OIG is forwarding a copy of this report to the Agency. The OIG issued a separate report related to Agency telephone services.

If you have any questions concerning this matter, please call me or have your staff contact Walter Bayer, Congressional and Intragovernmental Liaison, at (202) 358-6319.

Sincerely,



Gail S. Ennis
Inspector General

Enclosure

cc:

Commissioner of Social Security

The Social Security Administration's Field Office Customer Service

A-08-20-50898



July 2020

Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To review access and wait times for people seeking assistance from, and problem resolution through, the Social Security Administration's (SSA) field offices.

Background

On November 6, 2019, Representative Larson, Chair of the Subcommittee on Social Security, requested that the Office of the Inspector General review SSA's field office customer wait times and telephone services. In this report, we address SSA's field office customer wait times. We have issued a separate report related to SSA's telephone services.

SSA provided field office wait times for Fiscal Years (FY) 2010 through 2019 from its Customer Service Record data. We discussed with SSA factors that affect field office wait times and strategies it uses to manage those wait times.

Results of Review

Since 2010, we have conducted four reviews of field office customer service and found management and reduction of wait times continue to be major challenges for SSA. Between FYs 2010 and 2019, 9 of SSA's 10 regions had an increase in wait times. The following table depicts total visitors, average wait time per visitor, and visitors who waited over 1 hour for service in FYs 2010 and 2019. However, SSA had staffing losses during this period, and field offices were open to the public from a high of 35 hours per week to a low of 27 hours per week.

All Field Offices	FY 2010	FY 2019
Total Visitors	45.4 million	43.3 million
Average Wait Time Per Visitor	19.4 minutes	24.8 minutes
Visitors with Wait Time over 1 Hour	2.3 million	4.2 million

SSA closely monitors field office wait times at the national, regional, and field office levels. To meet the challenges it faces in minimizing customer wait times, SSA continues focusing on authorizing overtime; implementing more eServices; transferring pending workloads from busy offices to less busy offices; and hiring and training additional staff.

Factors that affect wait times include the volume of visitors, complex workloads, staffing issues, and public operating hours. As part of its effort to improve customer service, SSA ended its telework pilot in field offices in November 2019 and expanded its Wednesday office hours for the public in January 2020. However, effective March 17, 2020, the coronavirus disease forced SSA to temporarily close field offices to the public and expand telework. We plan to conduct additional reviews that will examine further factors that affect wait times and how SSA is managing field office wait times once SSA's offices re-open.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BEVE	Benefit Verification Letters
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
CSR	Customer Service Record
Fed. Reg.	Federal Register
FY	Fiscal Year
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
Operations	Office of Operations
POMS	Program Operations Manual System
SSA	Social Security Administration
VIPr	Visitor Intake Process Re-write

OBJECTIVE

Our objective was to review access and wait times for people seeking assistance from, and problem resolution through, the Social Security Administration's (SSA) field offices.

BACKGROUND

On November 6, 2019, Representative Larson, Chair of the Subcommittee on Social Security, requested that the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) review SSA's field office customer wait times and telephone services. In this report, we address SSA's field office customer wait times. We have issued a separate report related to SSA's telephone services.¹ See Appendix A for the request.

SSA administers its programs and services through a network of 1,227 field offices in 10 regions that serve the public throughout the United States and its territories.² Field offices are SSA's primary point of face-to-face contact with the public. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2019, approximately 43.3 million individuals visited SSA field offices.

SSA's Visitor Intake Process Re-write (VIPr), a Web-based application program, collects information about office visitors and appointments and provides management information for area, regional, and national reports. SSA measures wait time as follows: a visitor's wait time begins when he/she checks into VIPr and does not include time spent waiting in line to get to the VIPr kiosk; the wait time ends when the field office employee calls the visitor for his/her first substantive interview. VIPr provides real-time data related to visitors and reception activities that helps field offices analyze the timeliness of their customer service. VIPr interfaces with the Customer Service Record (CSR)³ and provides the interviewer with identifying information on the visitor. The Area Director and Regional Commissioner Offices monitor wait times at field offices in their areas and take measures to address issues, as appropriate.

¹ SSA, OIG, *The Social Security Administration's Telephone Services*, A-05-20-50899 (May 2020).

² The 1,227 consists of SSA field offices and resident stations. SSA includes resident stations in its field office figure. SSA, *Social Security History*, ssa.gov (last visited January 14, 2020).

³ The CSR system provides a means of collecting wait time data on all in-office interviews in SSA's field offices. *Privacy Act of 1974, as Amended; Alterations to Existing System of Records, Including New Routine Use*, 72 Fed. Reg. 71,470, p. 71,473 (December 17, 2007).

SSA provided field office wait times for FYs 2010 through 2019 from its CSR data. We discussed with SSA factors that affect field office wait times and strategies it uses to manage those wait times. We also interviewed managers⁴ at 20 field offices—10 with the shortest and 10 with the longest average wait times in FY 2019—to discuss factors that affected their wait times and identify common methods for reducing wait times. SSA provided information and comments to the congressional questions.⁵ See Appendix B for our scope and methodology.

RESULTS OF REVIEW

Since 2010, we have conducted four reviews⁶ of field office customer service and found management and reduction of wait times continue to be major challenges for SSA. Between FYs 2010 and 2019, 9 of SSA’s 10 regions had an increase in wait times. Table 1 depicts summary information on SSA’s total visitors, average wait time per visitor,⁷ and visitors who waited over 1 hour for service in FYs 2010 and 2019. However, SSA had staffing losses during this period, and field offices were open to the public from a high of 35 hours per week to a low of 27 hours per week.

Table 1: Summary Information

All Field Offices	FY 2010	FY 2019
Total Visitors	45.4 million	43.3 million
Average Wait Time Per Visitor	19.4 minutes	24.8 minutes
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SSA closely monitors field office wait times at the national, regional, and field office levels. To meet the challenges it faces in minimizing customer wait times, SSA continues focusing on authorizing overtime; implementing more eServices; transferring pending workloads from busy offices to less busy offices; and hiring and training additional staff.

⁴ We interviewed District Managers at all 20 field offices. Additionally, 6 of the 20 field offices included the Assistant District Manager and 8 of the 20 included the Operations Supervisor. We collectively refer to our interviewees as “managers” throughout the report as they had the same responses as the District Manager.

⁵ According to SSA, “During the course of this engagement, we thoroughly vetted all answers for accuracy and completeness through the [A]gency. Therefore, answers to the questions posed in the course of this engagement are [A]gency responses and represent the [A]gency’s position on the questions asked.”

⁶ SSA, OIG, *Customer Wait Times in the Social Security Administration’s Field Offices*, A-04-18-50260 (February 2018); *Informational Report: Customer Waiting Times in the Social Security Administration’s Field Offices*, A-04-17-50216 (December 2016); *Field Office Performance*, A-15-12-11290 (November 2013); and *Customer Waiting Times in the Social Security Administration’s Field Offices*, A-04-10-11034 (October 2010).

⁷ SSA calculates average wait time by summing total field office wait times and dividing by the total number of visitors.

Factors that affect wait times include the volume of visitors, complex workloads, staffing issues, and public operating hours. As part of its effort to improve customer service, SSA ended its telework pilot in field offices in November 2019⁸ and expanded its Wednesday office hours for the public in January 2020.⁹ However, effective March 17, 2020, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19)¹⁰ forced SSA to temporarily close field offices to the public,¹¹ which caused SSA to expand telework. We plan to conduct additional reviews that will examine further factors that affect wait times and how SSA is managing field office wait times once SSA's offices re-open.

Field office customer wait times

Between FYs 2010 and 2019, for each year:

i. How many people visited a field office?

According to SSA's CSR data, from FYs 2010 through 2019, SSA field offices had approximately 430 million visitors. Between FYs 2010 and 2019, SSA experienced a 4.8 percent decrease in the number of visitors,¹² although visitor volume has been increasing overall for 4 consecutive years. It is SSA's opinion the increase in field office visitors includes, but is not limited to, increases in imposter scams and interviews to verify identity for some Internet Claims submissions.

⁸ SSA, *A Message about Improving Service from Andrew Saul, Commissioner of Social Security--PRESS RELEASE* (November 4, 2019).

⁹ Effective January 8, 2020, SSA restored field office public service hours on Wednesdays, which expanded the visitor hours to 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. Andrew Saul, Commissioner, *Expanding Social Security Field Office Hours*, SSA, blog.ssa.gov (December 2, 2019).

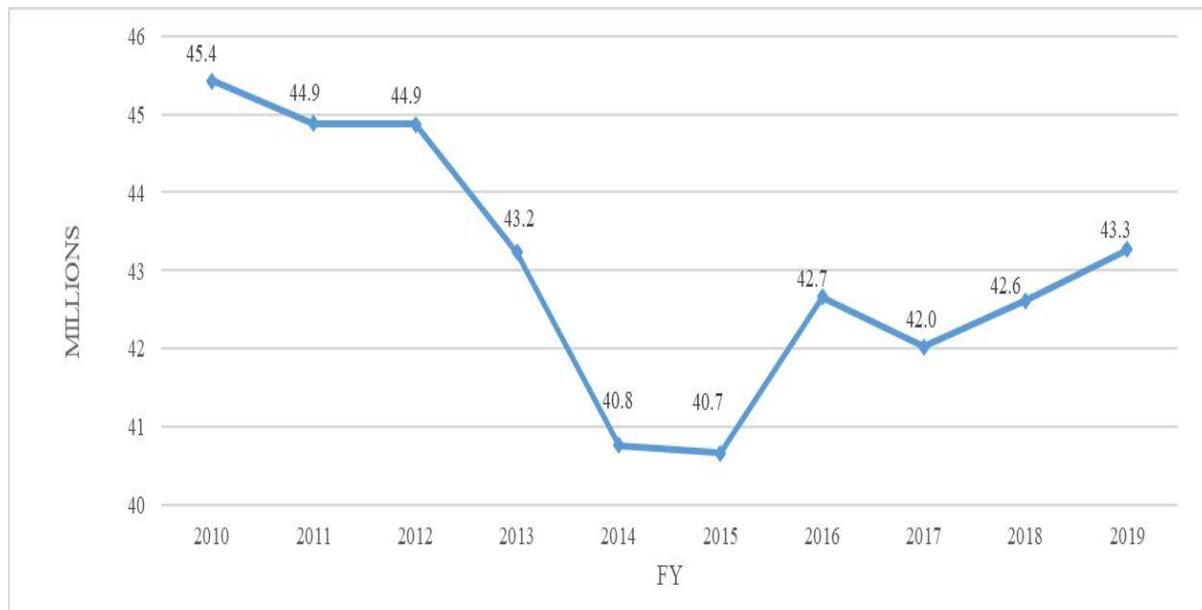
¹⁰ COVID-19 is a respiratory illness that can spread from person to person. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *What you need to know about coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)*, cdc.gov (last visited April 3, 2020). The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. World Health Organization, *Coronavirus (COVID-19) events as they happen*, who.int (last visited April 3, 2020).

¹¹ SSA, *Social Security & Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)*, ssa.gov (last visited April 21, 2020).

¹² To determine the 4.8 percent, we used actual visitor counts of 45,429,149 in FY 2010 and 43,266,935 in FY 2019.

Figure 1 shows the total number of field office visitors from FYs 2010 through 2019.

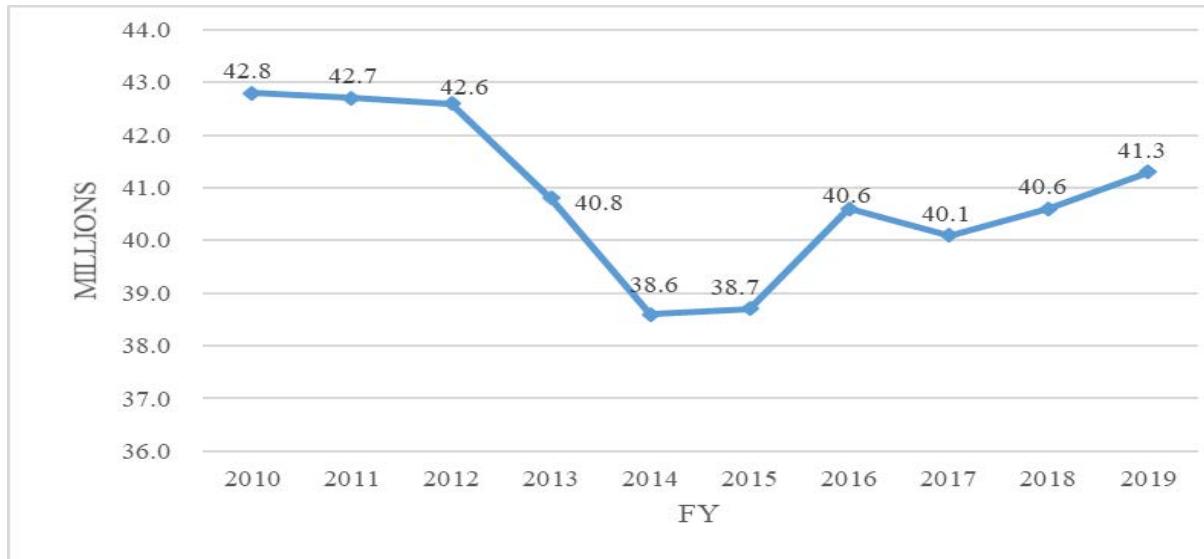
Figure 1: Total Field Office Visitors FYs 2010 Through 2019 (in Millions)



Source: SSA's CSR data.

While Figure 1 shows all visitors,¹³ Figure 2 reflects only those visitors who SSA served from FYs 2010 through 2019. It does not reflect those who left without service (see Figure 6).

Figure 2: Total Visitors, With and Without Appointments, SSA Serviced FYs 2010 Through 2019 (in Millions)

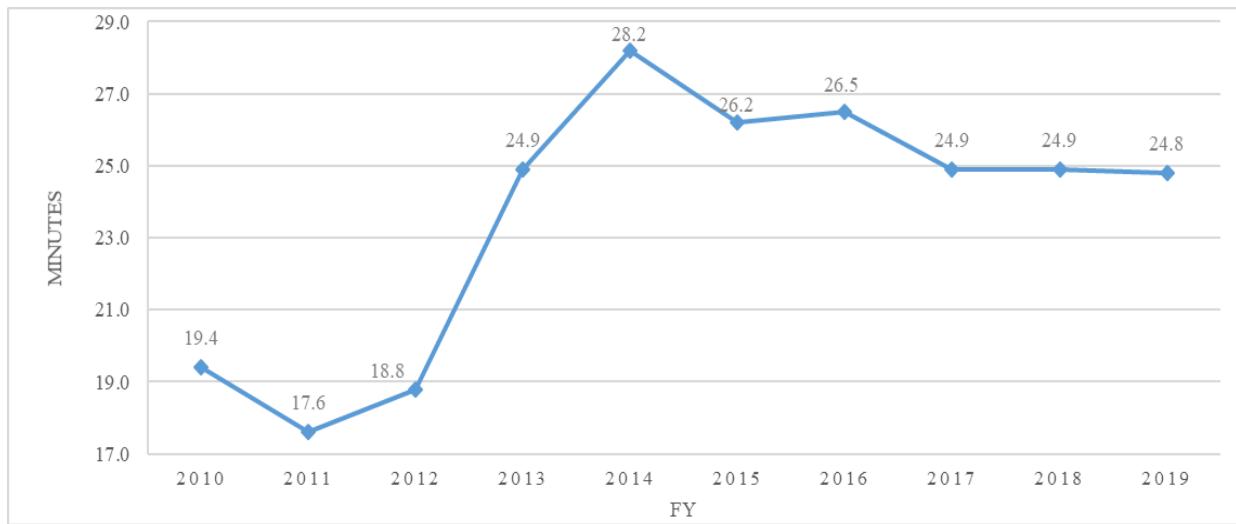


Source: SSA's CSR data.

ii. How long did people wait for service, and how many people waited longer than one hour?

According to SSA's CSR data, from 2010 through 2019, the average wait time across all field offices was 23.5 minutes.¹⁴ Between FYs 2010 and 2019, field office average wait time increased 27.8 percent. In that same period, the shortest and longest wait times were, on average, 17.6 minutes in FY 2011 and 28.2 minutes in FY 2014. As shown in Figure 9, SSA's field office staffing decreased during the years the wait times were the longest (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Average Wait Time FYs 2010 Through 2019 (in Minutes)



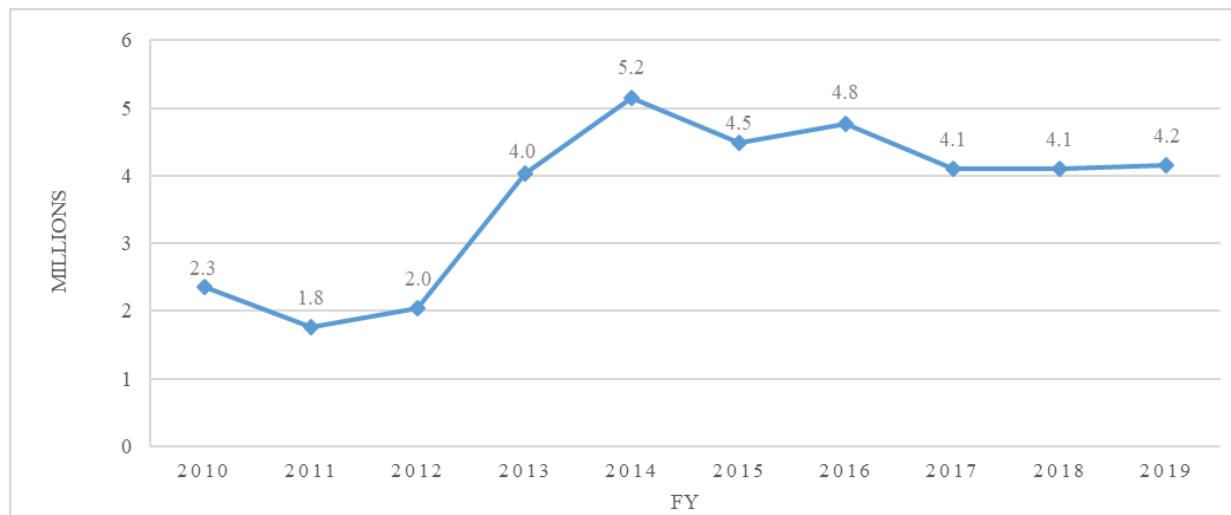
Source: SSA's CSR data.

¹³ In our audit of *Customer Wait Times in the Social Security Administration's Field Offices*, A-04-18-50260 (February 2018), we reported there were 43.5 million visitors to field offices in FY 2016. SSA revised the number of field office visitors to 42.7 million for FY 2016 by removing the 53rd week that was included in FY 2016.

¹⁴ SSA calculates average wait time by summing total field office wait times and dividing by the total number of visitors.

SSA's CSR data also show that approximately 37 million visitors waited longer than 1 hour from FYs 2010 through 2019—an average of 3.7 million visitors per year during this period (see Figure 4).¹⁵

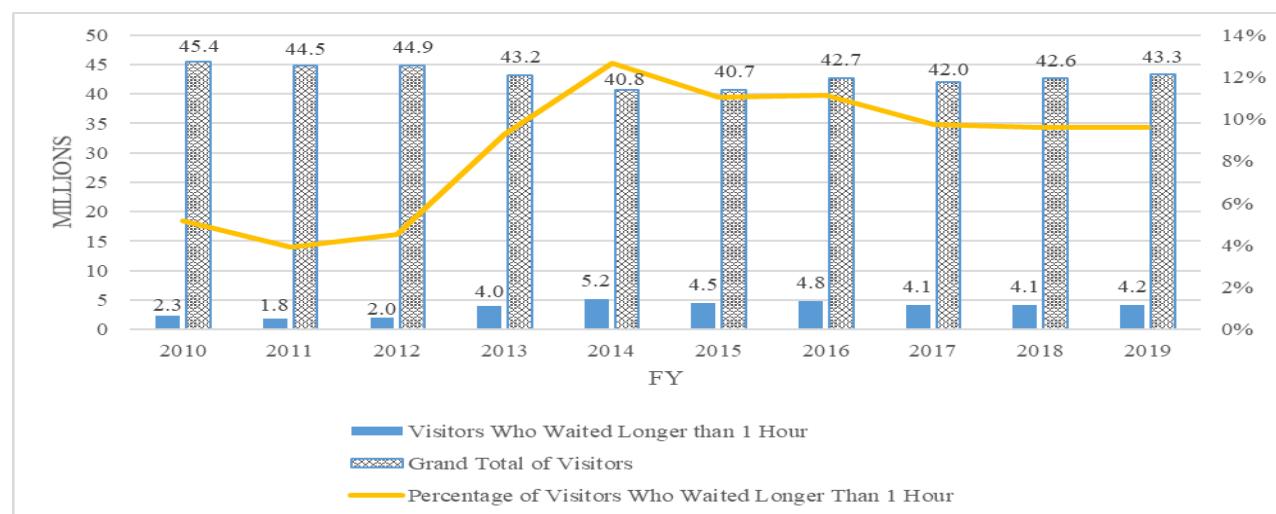
**Figure 4: Visitors Who Waited Longer Than 1 Hour
FYs 2010 Through 2019 (in Millions)**



Source: SSA's CSR data.

The percentage of visitors waiting longer than 1 hour doubled from 5 percent in FY 2010 to 10 percent in FY 2019 (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Visitors Who Waited Longer Than 1 Hour as a Percentage of Total Visitors FYs 2010 Through 2019



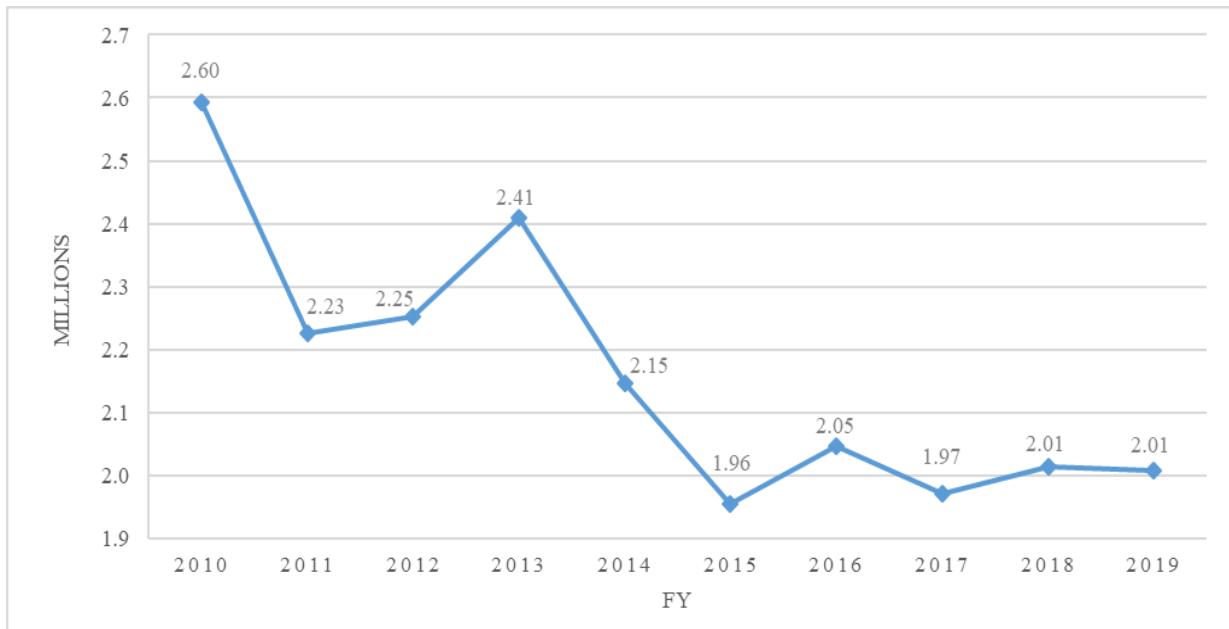
Source: SSA's CSR data.

¹⁵ See Footnote 14.

iii. How many people left a field office without service?

According to SSA's CSR data, approximately 21.6 million¹⁶ (5 percent) of the 430 million visitors left an SSA field office without receiving service from FYs 2010 through 2019—an average of 2.2 million visitors per year during this period (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Visitors Who Checked into VIPr but Left a Field Office Without Receiving Service FYs 2010 Through 2019 (in Millions)



Source: SSA's CSR data.

Note: According to SSA, the CSR reports customers who failed to respond when SSA called their number as "left without service." The Agency has no way to measure or know why the claimant did not respond to SSA's interview summons, only that they did not respond. SSA instructs employees to classify the interview as no response within the VIPr system and the CSR report re-labels no response interviews as "left without service."

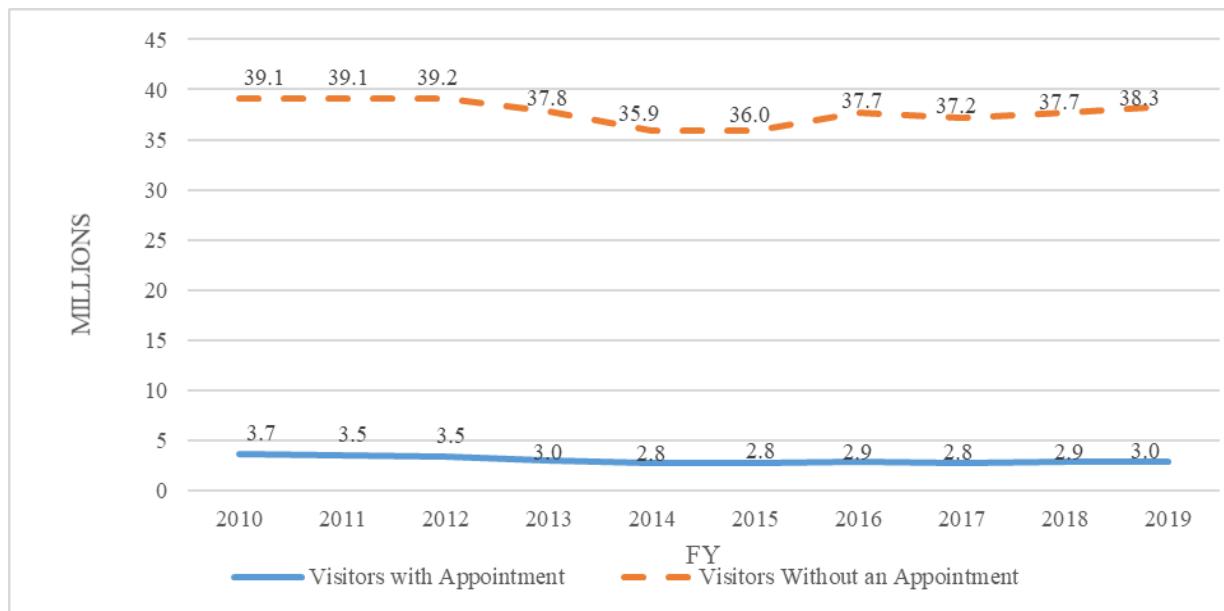
¹⁶ SSA measures visitors who check into VIPr but leave before receiving service. SSA does not measure visitors who arrive at a field office but do not check into VIPr.

We interviewed 20 field office managers¹⁷ who explained there are a number of reasons a customer may leave before they are served. For example, customers leave because of long wait times; a customer may come to the field office without all the required documentation and leave to obtain it; a customer's visit may be interrupted for personal reasons, such as work or caring for family; or a customer may realize he/she can complete business online.

iv. How many people visited a field office with an appointment, and how did their experience compare to people who visited without an appointment?

According to SSA's CSR data, from FYs 2010 through 2019, approximately 409 million people visited, and received services at, an SSA field office.¹⁸ Of these, approximately 31 million (7.5 percent) had an appointment, an average of 3.1 million per year, and approximately 378 million (92.5 percent) did not have an appointment, an average of approximately 38 million per year (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Visitors with and Without Appointments FYs 2010 Through 2019 (in Millions)



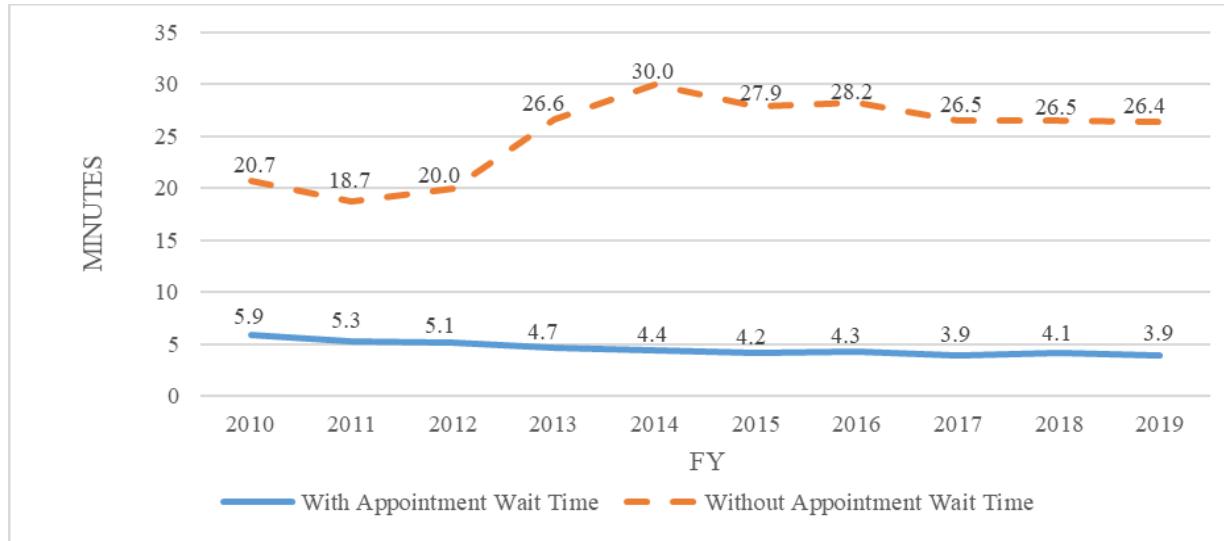
Source: SSA's CSR data.

¹⁷ We interviewed District Managers at the 20 field offices with the shortest and longest average wait times. We identified these 20 field offices by obtaining and reviewing data from SSA's Management Information Central system (see Appendix C). Additionally, 6 of the 20 field offices included the Assistant District Manager, and 8 of the 20 included the Operations Supervisor. We collectively refer to our interviewees as "managers" as they had the same responses as the District Manager.

¹⁸ The approximately 409 million visitors does not include the approximately 21.6 million visitors who left without service (see Figure 6).

Over the last 10 years, visitors with an appointment have waited an average of 4.6 minutes while visitors without an appointment have waited an average of 25.1 minutes (see Figure 8).¹⁹

Figure 8: Average Wait Times for Visitors with and Without an Appointment FYs 2010 Through 2019 (in Minutes)



Source: SSA's CSR data.

v. How long did people wait for a scheduled appointment (time between the scheduling request and the appointment)?

SSA reported it maintained historical information on the time between the scheduling request and the appointment for only FYs 2015 through 2019. FY 2015 had the highest number of average elapsed days between a scheduling request and an appointment but the lowest number of scheduled appointments (see Table 2).

Table 2: Average Elapsed Days per Scheduled Appointments FYs 2015 Through 2019

FY	Average Elapsed Days Between Request and Appointment	Number of Scheduled In-office and Telephone Appointments
2015	23.0	4,279,906
2016	19.9	4,569,938
2017	20.3	4,384,633
2018	21.0	4,295,963
2019	22.6	4,429,829

Source: SSA's Appointment System Management Information data.

¹⁹ SSA calculates average wait time by summing total field office wait times and dividing by the total number of visitors.

What field offices have the shortest and longest waiting times and why?

We identified 20 field offices—10 with the shortest and 10 with the longest average wait times in FY 2019 (see Appendix C).²⁰ We interviewed managers²¹ at these 20 offices. According to these field office managers, many factors contribute to office wait times. These factors include staffing levels; increased imposter scam calls; office location; customers' service needs; workload volumes and complexity; and slow systems. While we plan to test these assertions in a future audit once SSA's operations return to normal from COVID-19, we previously reported many factors contribute to office wait times.²² SSA stated that these factors include staffing levels and the number of interview stations; customers' service needs; and workload volumes and complexity.²³

How many offices had one or more days when they could not accommodate all visitors who arrived without an appointment, and what was the average number of such days?

According to SSA, its “. . . practice is that field offices serve all customers with appointments and those who walk-in during office hours.” SSA stated there were no field offices that had 1 or more days when they could not accommodate all visitors who arrived with or without an appointment, and they accommodate all visitors who request service during operating hours.

While the data showed that approximately 2 million visitors left a field office each year without service since FY 2015 (see Figure 6), the data do not separately track those who left because SSA was unable to provide services. According to SSA, the CSR reports customers, who failed to respond when SSA called their number, as “left without service.” The Agency has no way to measure or know why the claimant did not respond to SSA’s interview summons; it only knows they did not respond. SSA instructs employees to classify the interview as no response in the VIPr system, and the CSR report re-labels no response interviews as “left without service.” During our interviews of managers²⁴ at 20 field offices, we found managers in 4 offices who

²⁰ We identified the 20 field offices by obtaining and reviewing data from SSA’s Management Information Central system.

²¹ We interviewed District Managers at all 20 field offices. Additionally, 6 of the 20 field offices included the Assistant District Manager, and 8 of the 20 included the Operations Supervisor. We collectively refer to our interviewees as “managers” as they had the same responses as the District Manager.

²² SSA, OIG, *Customer Wait Times in the Social Security Administration’s Field Offices*, A-04-18-50260, p. 2 (February 2018); and *Customer Waiting Times in the Social Security Administration’s Field Offices*, A-04-10-11034, p. 5 (October 2010).

²³ According to SSA, “During the course of this engagement, we thoroughly vetted all answers for accuracy and completeness through the [A]gency. Therefore, answers to the questions posed in the course of this engagement are [A]gency responses and represent the [A]gency’s position on the questions asked.”

²⁴ See Footnote 21.

could not accommodate all visitors. This ranged from occurring daily (with between 20 and 30 visitors not served per week) to occurring 2 to 3 times per quarter. Two of the managers noted they reported the issue (one to the Area Director's Office and one to the Level 1 Manager). Two of the managers cited walk-in visitors late in the afternoon to file claims but there was not enough staff to serve them. In the late afternoon, offices may triage visitors to alternate service avenues²⁵ or obtain documents and signatures as needed for a telephone call the following day. All four of these field offices stated they were understaffed.

We asked SSA to address the discrepancy we identified with four field offices that were unable to accommodate all visitors. SSA stated it was not aware that some field offices were having trouble accommodating all visitors, and it is concerned field offices are unable to service them. SSA plans to address this issue in its field offices, for example by providing training on agency policy.²⁶ We plan to study this further in a future audit once SSA's operations return to normal.

Does SSA's tracking fully reflect the time people wait when they visit a field office?

A visitor's wait time begins when he/she checks into VIPr (once the field office officially opens) and does not include time spent waiting in line to get to the VIPr kiosk. The wait time ends when the first substantive interview starts.²⁷ SSA stated, "For example, the wait time of a customer visiting to file a retirement claim would be the difference between their check-in time and the start of their retirement interview." Wait times do not include visitors who left without service because a substantive interview did not occur. SSA stated it had not changed how it measures wait times from FYs 2010 through 2019.

The reliability of wait times can be affected by an employee's use of the VIPr system and whether the employee ends the wait time before the visitor has his/her first substantive interview. Field office managers we interviewed did not always believe field offices or staff consistently use VIPr. For example, employees can cause wait times to appear shorter if they refer the visitor for another interview but improperly end the wait time in VIPr after the first interview. Conversely, employees can make wait times appear longer if they do not end the wait time at the first substantive interview.

²⁵ According to SSA, an alternate service avenue would be *my Social Security*.

²⁶ See Footnote 23.

²⁷ Field office employees conduct an initial screening interview solely to determine the reason for the visit. A substantive interview is any interview other than an initial screening. If screening is the only topic for that office visit, SSA considers the screening as the first substantive interview. SSA, Office of Public Service and Operations Support, *Field Office Visitor Data MI Documentation* (May 25, 2016).

We shared managers' comments on field office use of VIPr with SSA. SSA stated it was not aware of field offices improperly ending wait times to make them appear shorter but acknowledged that wait times captured may not be accurate if employees do not use VIPr according to Agency policy.²⁸ Because of the information we obtained on employees' and field offices' inconsistent use of VIPr, we are planning additional audit work in this area.

Since 2010, what changes have occurred in staffing, workloads, the number of field offices, operating hours, and other factors, and how have those changes affected SSA's ability to ensure that field offices are able to serve visitors in a timely manner?

Staffing

SSA reported that, from FYs 2011 through 2013, it was under a 3-year hiring freeze because of lower-than-requested funding levels, and it lost approximately 3,000 field office employees between FYs 2010 and 2013, which, according to SSA, resulted in a significant loss of institutional knowledge and experience. SSA explained that new employees must receive extensive training and mentoring from experienced staff before they become proficient in their jobs. In FY 2014, SSA began hiring new staff, but it implemented another hiring freeze in FY 2016. SSA's staffing levels began increasing in FY 2018.²⁹ In FY 2020, SSA has plans for approximately 1,900 new hires in its field offices. Had there been no attrition, the FY 2020 staffing level would be at 29,468 field office employees, which is still 608 (2 percent) employees lower than it was in FY 2010.³⁰

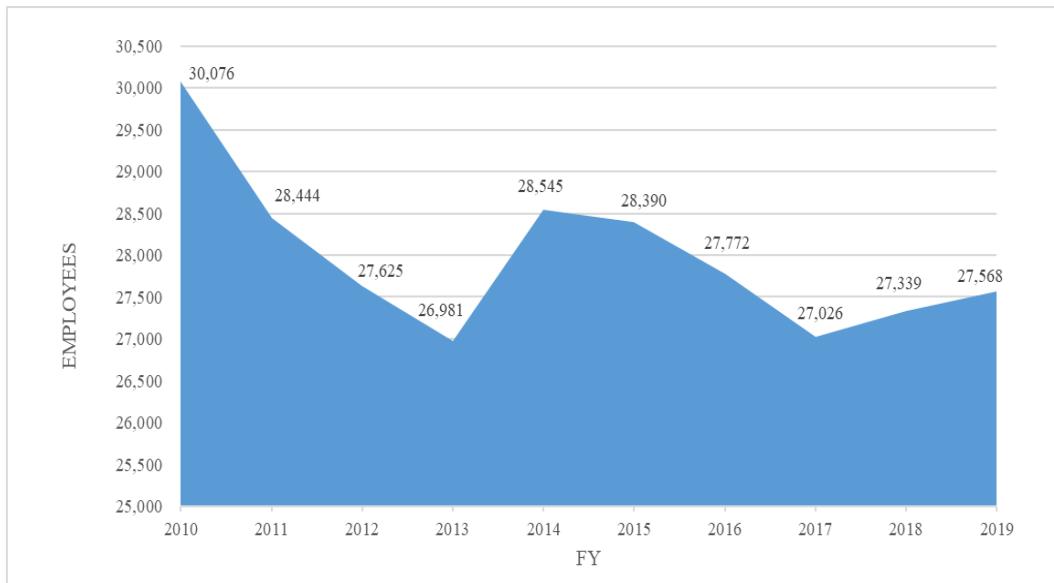
²⁸ See Footnote 23.

²⁹ The staffing numbers for this audit include temporary and part-time employees for field offices. The staffing number in our prior audit of *Customer Wait Times in the Social Security Administration's Field Offices*, A 04-18-50260 (February 2018), included employees in additional offices, such as Social Security Card Centers and Area Support Units, and only included employees in permanent positions. SSA also noted it obtained the prior audit numbers from a database tool that has been decommissioned and cannot be replicated.

³⁰ As of May 2020, SSA had hired 100 employees. SSA stated that COVID-19 has made it difficult to complete certain steps in the hiring process, such as background checks and fingerprinting.

Figure 9 illustrates the rise and fall in the number of field office employees.

Figure 9: Number of Field Office Employees FYs 2010 Through 2019



Source: SSA's Human Resource Operational Data Store based on data obtained through the WebFocus8 Tool.

SSA stated that regional, area, and local managers monitor staffing and resources and can make adjustments to meet service area and delivery needs. These adjustments include allocating overtime, limiting leave, redistributing work (across offices), and redirecting telephone traffic.

Workloads

SSA stated that, over the past 10 years, it has seen a significant increase in the number of beneficiaries.³¹ At the end of FY 2009, 60.3 million individuals were receiving Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance benefits and Supplemental Security Income payments. By the end of FY 2019, that number had increased approximately 25 percent to 75.5 million individuals. SSA stated this increase in beneficiaries contributed to an increase in wait times, calls to the national 800-number, program integrity workloads, post-entitlement actions, and field office traffic.³² However, the CSR data provided by SSA showed the number of field office visitors decreased between FYs 2010 and 2019 (see Figure 1). During this same period, staffing decreased (see Figure 9), which may have contributed to increased wait times (see Figure 3).

Over a 10-year period (see Table 3), SSA processed annually an average of

- 16.8 million Social Security number cards;
- 5.2 million Old-Age and Survivors Insurance claims;
- 3 million Disability Insurance claims; and
- 2.5 million Supplemental Security Income claims.³³

Table 3: Major Workloads SSA Processed FYs 2009 Through 2018 (in Millions)

Workload	FY 2009	FY 2010	FY 2011	FY 2012	FY 2013	FY 2014	FY 2015	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018
Social Security Numbers	17.0	17.0	17.0	17.0	17.0	16.0	16.0	17.0	17.0	17.0
Old-Age Survivors Insurance	4.7	4.7	4.8	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.3	5.5	5.6	5.9
Disability Insurance	3.1	3.4	3.6	3.4	3.2	3.1	2.7	2.8	2.6	2.5
Supplemental Security Income	2.9	3.1	3.2	3.0	2.6	2.4	2.1	2.1	1.9	1.8

Sources: SSA's Congressional Operating Plan (FYs 2010 Through 2013), SSA's *Actual Performance* (FYs 2013 Through 2016), SSA's *Workload Measures* (FYs 2017 Through 2018), and SSA's *Annual Statistical Supplement to the Social Security Bulletin* (2010 Through 2019).

³¹ See Footnote 23.

³² See Footnote 23.

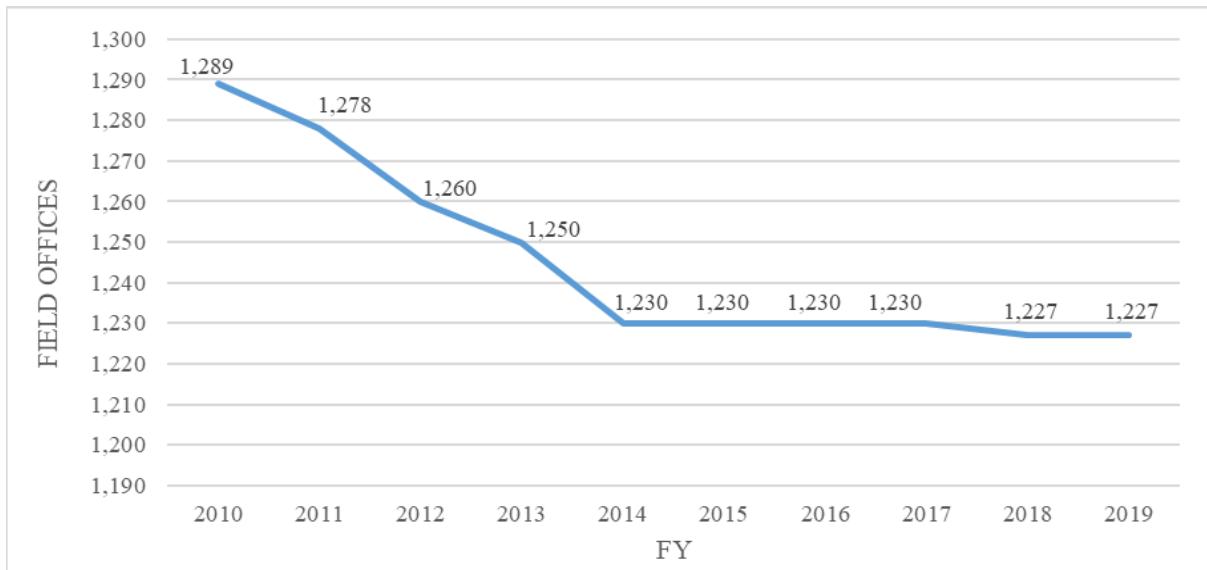
³³ Because FY 2019 data were not available for all workloads, we used FY 2009 through 2018 workload data to be consistent. SSA, *Congressional Operating Plan* (FYs 2010 Through 2013), SSA, *Actual Performance* (FYs 2013 Through 2016), SSA, *Workload Measures* (FYs 2017 Through 2018), and SSA, *Annual Statistical Supplement to the Social Security Bulletin* (2010 through 2019).

In our 2018 report, we discussed field office processing times with SSA.³⁴ In our report, we also noted that because of varying complexities of workloads and individual visitors' needs, processing times vary greatly.

Number of Field Offices

In FY 2010, SSA had 1,289 field offices, which was the highest number of field offices during FYs 2010 through 2019.³⁵ That number dropped to 1,230 in FYs 2014 through 2017 and then decreased slightly again in FYs 2018 and 2019 to 1,227 field offices (see Figure 10). In FY 2018, we reviewed the circumstances surrounding, and procedures SSA followed, when closing three of its field offices. These reviews were at the request of two members of the U.S. House of Representatives.³⁶

Figure 10: Number of Field Offices FYs 2010 Through 2019



Source: SSA's Detailed Office/Organization Resource System based on data obtained through the WebFocus8 Tool.

³⁴ SSA, OIG, *Customer Wait Times in the Social Security Administration's Field Offices*, A-04-18-50260, p. 4 (February 2018).

³⁵ The field office numbers consist of SSA field offices and resident stations. SSA includes resident stations in its field office figure. SSA, *Social Security History*, ssa.gov (last visited January 14, 2020).

³⁶ SSA, OIG, *Congressional Response Report: Field Office Closures in the Philadelphia Region*, A-03-18-50720 (September 2018); and *Congressional Response Report: Milwaukee Social Security Administration Field Office Closure*, A-05-18-50671 (July 2018).

Operating Hours

SSA stated that field offices generally allow staff to work from 7:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. local time. The Agency provided the hours field offices were open to the public since FY 2010 (see Table 4).

Table 4: Field Office Hours Open to the Public

FY	Field Office Hours (Local Time)	Effective Dates
2010	9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.	October 1, 2009 – September 30, 2010
2011	9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.	October 1, 2010 – August 14, 2011
	9:00 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.	August 15, 2011 – September 30, 2011
2012	9:00 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.	October 1, 2011 – September 30, 2012
2013	9:00 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.	October 1, 2012 – November 18, 2012
	9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.	November 19, 2012 – January 1, 2013
	9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m. (Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday) 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. (Wednesday)	January 2, 2013 – September 30, 2013
2014	9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m. (Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday) 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. (Wednesday)	October 1, 2013 – September 30, 2014
2015	9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m. (Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday) 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. (Wednesday)	October 1, 2014 – March 15, 2015
	9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. (Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday) 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. (Wednesday)	March 16, 2015 – September 30, 2015
2016 to 2019	9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. (Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday) 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. (Wednesday)	October 1, 2015 – September 30, 2019
2020	9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. (Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday) 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. (Wednesday)	October 1, 2019 – January 7, 2020
	9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.	January 8, 2020 – March 16, 2020

Source: SSA.

Between FYs 2010 and 2019, SSA's field offices were open to the public from a high of 35 hours per week to a low of 27 hours per week. When SSA's field office hours were at the lowest (from part of FY 2013 through part of FY 2015), visitors waited longer, on average (see Figure 3), but the total number of field office visitors decreased (see Figure 1). As noted in Figure 9, FY 2013 had the lowest number of field office staff during this period, which, according to SSA, resulted in a significant loss of institutional knowledge and experience and attributed to the increase in wait times.

SSA closed field offices early to the public on Wednesdays during times of more constrained resources. SSA stated this helped ensure that field office employees had time to process work as staff has other workloads in addition to serving field office visitors.

Effective January 8, 2020, SSA had restored field office public service hours on Wednesdays, which made the visitor hours 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Monday through Friday.³⁷ While all field offices are subject to the restored public service office hours, SSA noted office “. . . hours may vary slightly in certain locations to accommodate local service area needs.” For example, some field offices open around 8:45 a.m. so visitors could begin signing into VIPr earlier.³⁸ However, effective March 17, 2020, SSA temporarily closed its offices to the public because of COVID-19.³⁹

Other Factors

SSA’s Commissioner reported that imposter scam calls have increased the number of walk-in visitors and telephone calls to field offices.⁴⁰ Because SSA did not track the number of imposter scam-related transactions its field offices had with the public, the OIG could not definitively conclude whether the scams caused monthly visitor or call volume changes. In FY 2019, the OIG received about 65,000 scam-related allegations from SSA staff, an increase from about 5,000 SSA-referred imposter scam allegations in FY 2018. SSA reported that of the 65,000 scam allegations it sent to OIG, field office staff initiated 17,000 while national 800-number staff initiated the remaining 48,000. SSA estimates its response to imposter scams—including taking these scam allegations and answering calls to its national 800-number⁴¹ require the equivalent of over 100 workyears⁴² or the resources needed to process approximately 6,000 initial disability claims, almost 43,000 retirement claims, or almost 270,000 SSN card requests.

SSA is working with OIG to combat these scams and improve customer service. In November 2019, the Inspector General and the Commissioner launched OIG’s dedicated online scam reporting form. SSA also updated its field office and national 800-number messaging to educate callers about the scams and how to report them. SSA also partnered with OIG and

³⁷ Andrew Saul, Commissioner, *Expanding Social Security Field Office Hours*, SSA, blog.ssa.gov (December 2, 2019).

³⁸ While visitors may sign into VIPr sooner, wait time does not start until the field office officially opens. Having visitors sign into VIPr earlier allows field office staff to serve visitors as soon as the field office officially opens.

³⁹ SSA, *Social Security & Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)*, ssa.gov (last visited April 21, 2020).

⁴⁰ *That’s Not the Government Calling: Protecting Seniors from the Social Security Impersonation Scam: Hearing Before the Senate Special Committee on Aging*, 116th Congress pp. 1 and 3 (2020) (statement of Andrew Saul, Commissioner, SSA).

⁴¹ While SSA did not specifically track scam-related calls, SSA estimated it received over 854,000 scam-related calls to its national 800-number in FY 2019. For additional information about SSA’s estimation methodology, see SSA, OIG, *Congressional Response Report: The Social Security Administration’s Response to Telephone Imposter Scams*, A-02-20-50904 (May 2020).

⁴² Hours per workyear may vary depending on the number of paid days in a particular FY. Workyears include time spent in full and part-time employment and overtime.

telephone carriers to block fraudsters from spoofing its national 800-number. Because of congressional interest, we conducted a separate review related to imposter scams.⁴³

SSA noted that increasing workloads and staffing losses have affected field office wait times over the last decade. To address this, SSA restored field office afternoon hours on Wednesdays⁴⁴ and increased its hiring. However, SSA noted that these actions “. . . do not translate into overnight improvements because we must invest significant resources into training newly hired employees.” Further, effective March 17, 2020, SSA temporarily closed its offices to the public because of COVID-19.⁴⁵

What steps is SSA taking to improve access and reduce wait times, and what is your assessment of the likely effectiveness of those strategies?

SSA stated its Commissioner “. . . is committed to improving customer service and has made it his highest priority for the [A]gency.” SSA stated it is working to reduce wait times in its field offices. According to SSA, reduced wait times benefit the public and SSA’s employees because it allows “. . . employees to focus on the person in front of them and not the piles of work around them.” To improve customer wait times at field offices, SSA

- ended its telework pilot in all Operations components in November 2019;⁴⁶
- restored public service hours on Wednesday afternoons effective January 8, 2020;⁴⁷ and
- targeted additional hiring in its public service offices, which includes field offices, with its FY 2020 appropriation, which it stated will help reduce the backlogs in its processing centers, maximize face-to-face service, and improve national 800-number service.⁴⁸

However, effective March 17, 2020, because of COVID-19, SSA temporarily closed its field offices to the public,⁴⁹ which caused it to expand telework. We intend to analyze productivity and other effects of telework from data related to the COVID-19 response and from prior telework pilots in future audits.

⁴³ SSA, OIG, *Congressional Response Report: The Social Security Administration’s Response to Telephone Imposter Scams*, A-02-20-50904 (May 2020).

⁴⁴ See Footnote 37.

⁴⁵ See Footnote 39.

⁴⁶ SSA, *A Message about Improving Service from Andrew Saul, Commissioner of Social Security--PRESS RELEASE* (November 4, 2019).

⁴⁷ See Footnote 37.

⁴⁸ See Footnote 46.

⁴⁹ See Footnote 39.

Finally, SSA is modernizing its technology⁵⁰ and continues using such strategies as promoting eServices; transferring pending workloads from busy offices to less busy offices; hiring and training additional staff; providing Self-Help Personal Computers in field offices; using Workload Support Unit capacity to relieve some of the stress on the busiest field offices; using Video Service Delivery and work sharing; authorizing overtime; and sharing best practices.⁵¹ We discuss SSA's recent steps in Appendix D.

SSA notes these are important steps toward improving its customer service and wait times but acknowledges these changes will not resolve all its challenges. SSA stated, "It will take time and a multi-focused approach to make improvements, including hiring more staff, providing helpful training and feedback to employees, and implementing business processes and technology enhancements." At this time, the recent and planned changes are too new to assess their impact on customer wait times.

CONCLUSIONS

SSA continues to face many challenges in managing and reducing customer wait times. Over the past 10 years SSA has continued using numerous strategies to address those challenges, such as improving eServices and transferring pending workloads from busy offices to less busy offices.⁵² More recently, SSA had increased hiring, expanded its normal operating hours,⁵³ and ended telework for field office employees.⁵⁴ However, because of COVID-19, SSA has changed its normal operating procedures⁵⁵ and temporarily expanded telework for its employees. OIG plans to assess SSA initiatives intended to reduce customer wait times once SSA resumes steady-state operations post-COVID-19 response.

⁵⁰ See Footnote 46.

⁵¹ SSA, OIG, *Customer Wait Times in the Social Security Administration's Field Offices*, A-04-18-50260, pp. 4-6 (February 2018).

⁵² SSA, OIG, *Customer Wait Times in the Social Security Administration's Field Offices*, A-04-18-50260, p. 2 (February 2018); *Field Office Performance*, A-15-12-11290, p. 14 (November 2013); and *Customer Waiting Times in the Social Security Administration's Field Offices*, A-04-10-11034, p. 3 (October 2010).

⁵³ See Footnote 37.

⁵⁴ See Footnote 46.

⁵⁵ See Footnote 39.

AGENCY COMMENTS

The Agency's comments are included in Appendix E.



Rona Lawson
Assistant Inspector General for Audit

APPENDICES

Appendix A – LETTER FROM CONGRESS

JOHN B. LARSON
CONNECTICUT,
CHAIRMAN

BILL PASCRELL JR., NEW JERSEY
LINDA T. SANCHEZ, CALIFORNIA
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BRENDAN BOYLE, PENNSYLVANIA
BRAD SCHNEIDER, ILLINOIS
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STAFF DIRECTOR

Congress of the United States

U.S. House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SECURITY

1102 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
(202) 225-3625

Washington, DC 20515-0348

<http://waysandmeans.house.gov>

November 6, 2019

Gail S. Ennis
Inspector General
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21207

Dear Ms. Ennis:

I write to request that the Office of Inspector General (OIG) review access and wait times for people seeking assistance and problem resolution through the Social Security Administration's (SSA's) field offices and telephone services.

Over the years, the OIG has conducted several reviews of customer wait times at SSA's field offices. The OIG's most recent report on this topic compiled valuable information on wait times, examined trends from 2010 to 2017, and compared those trends to field office staffing and office hours. Since then, field offices have continued to see a high volume of visitors – averaging 170,000 visitors per day in fiscal year 2018. Yet, little is known about recent trends in field office wait times and whether people have been able to access the services they need.

The public also relies heavily on SSA's telephone services, calling the agency's national 1-800 number and its field offices for timely information and assistance. In fiscal year 2017, SSA's national 1-800 number alone received 76 million calls – but handled only 36 million calls, with people waiting an average of 13 minutes. By fiscal year 2018, average wait times on the national 1-800 number had gone up to 24 minutes, with 15 percent of callers getting a busy signal. Similarly, in fiscal year 2018, SSA's field office network enterprise phone system answered only 81 percent of calls.

I am deeply concerned about the impact of these lengthy delays on the American people's ability to get their Social Security questions answered and problems solved.

Given the critical importance of ensuring strong service to the American people at SSA's field offices and across SSA's telephone services, I am requesting reports that answer the following questions:

Letter to Inspector General Ennis
November 6, 2019
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1) Field office customer wait times.

- a. Between FYs 2010 and 2019, for each year:
 - i. How many people visited a field office?
 - ii. How long did people wait for service, and how many people waited longer than one hour?
 - iii. How many people left a field office without service?
 - iv. How many people visited a field office with an appointment, and how did their experience compare to people who visited without an appointment?
 - v. How long did people wait for a scheduled appointment (time between the scheduling request and the appointment)?
- b. What field offices have the shortest and longest waiting times, and why?
- c. How many offices had one or more days when they could not accommodate all visitors who arrived without an appointment, and what was the average number of such days?
- d. Does SSA's tracking fully reflect the time people wait when they visit a field office?
- e. Since 2010, what changes have occurred in staffing, workloads, the number of field offices, operating hours, and other factors, and how have those changes affected SSA's ability to ensure that field offices are able to serve visitors in a timely manner?
- f. What steps is SSA taking to improve access and reduce wait times, and what is your assessment of the likely effectiveness of those strategies?

2) Telephone service and customer wait times.

- a. Between FYs 2010 and 2019, for each year:
 - i. How many calls were made to SSA's national 1-800 number; how many were made, in aggregate, to field offices?
 - ii. For 1-800-service and local field office telephone service, separately:
 - 1. How many calls were routed to Program Service Centers?
 - 2. How many calls: got a busy signal, were abandoned in menus, were abandoned in the queue, were handled by agents, or were handled by automated services?
 - 3. What was the average speed of answer?
 - 4. What percent of customers were able to resolve their issue on the first call, with no follow-up required?
- b. How does SSA's performance on these metrics compare to typical government and industry benchmarks?
- c. How could SSA better track and evaluate callers' experience and satisfaction?

Letter to Inspector General Ennis

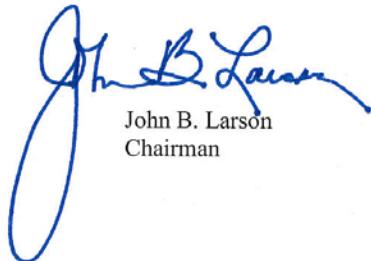
November 6, 2019

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- d. What changes have occurred in staffing, workloads, or other factors, including but not limited to the recent imposter scams? How have those changes affected SSA's ability to ensure that the 1-800 number and field offices are able to assist callers in a timely manner, and that the Program Service Centers are able to achieve priority and critical workloads?

Thank you for your prompt attention to this request. Should you or your staff have any questions, please contact Kathryn Olson, the Social Security Subcommittee Majority Staff Director, at (202) 225-9263.

Sincerely,



The image shows a handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read "John B. Larson". Below the signature, there is printed text identifying the signer.

John B. Larson
Chairman

Appendix B – SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

To answer the congressional questions (see Appendix A), we:

- Reviewed the Social Security Administration’s (SSA) policies, procedures, and operating instructions.
- Reviewed prior Office of the Inspector General reports related to field office wait times.¹
- Obtained and reviewed the following data from SSA for Fiscal Years 2010 through 2019.
 - The total number of field office visitors.
 - The amount of time each visitor waited for service.
 - The number of visitors who left a field office without receiving service.
 - The number of individuals who visited a field office with and without an appointment.
 - The field offices with the shortest and longest average wait times.
 - The number of field offices that had 1 or more days when they could not accommodate all visitors who arrived without an appointment, including the average number of such days.
- Interviewed managers² at the 10 field offices with the shortest and the 10 field offices with the longest average wait times in Fiscal Year 2019. We visited 8 field offices that were near an Office of Audit field office³ and interviewed the remaining 12 field offices via telephone. See Appendix C for additional information on the selected field offices.
- Determined SSA’s process for scheduling appointments and tracking wait times.

¹ SSA, OIG, *Customer Wait Times in the Social Security Administration’s Field Offices*, A-04-18-50260 (February 2018); *Informational Report: Customer Waiting Times in the Social Security Administration’s Field Offices*, A-04-17-50216 (December 2016); and *Customer Waiting Times in the Social Security Administration’s Field Offices*, A-04-10-11034 (October 2010).

² We interviewed District Managers at all 20 field offices. Additionally, 6 of the 20 field offices included the Assistant District Manager and 8 of the 20 included the Operations Supervisor. We collectively refer to our interviewees as “managers” throughout the report as they had the same responses as the District Manager.

³ The field offices visited were (1) Alexander City, Alabama; (2) Bloomingdale, Illinois; (3) Chicago Heights, Illinois; (4) Concord, New Hampshire; (5) Johnson County, Kansas; (6) Mt. Prospect, Illinois; (7) Rockville, Maryland; and (8) Woodstock, Illinois.

- Reviewed changes (since 2010) in staffing, workloads, the number of field offices, operating hours, and other factors that affected SSA's ability to ensure field offices serve visitors in a timely manner.
- Determined steps SSA is taking to improve field office wait time.
- Reviewed communications SSA provided regarding staff adjustments.

We conducted our review between November 2019 and May 2020 in Birmingham, Alabama. The principal entities reviewed were SSA's field offices under the Office of the Deputy Commissioner for Operations. We determined the data used for this audit were sufficiently reliable to meet our objective. We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We believe the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We assessed the significance of internal controls necessary to satisfy the audit objective. We determined that internal controls were not significant to the audit objective; therefore, we did not assess the design, implementation, or operating effectiveness of internal controls.

Appendix C – FIELD OFFICES WITH THE SHORTEST AND LONGEST AVERAGE WAIT TIMES IN FY 2019

We identified the Social Security Administration’s 10 field offices with the shortest and longest average wait times in Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 (see Table C–1 and Table C–2). We visited 8 field offices¹ and interviewed the remaining 12 field office managers via telephone.

Table C–1: Field Offices with the Shortest Average Wait Time (in Minutes) in FY 2019

Office Name	Region	Average Wait Time
Laurel, Mississippi	Atlanta	2.9
Concord, New Hampshire	Boston	3.9
Alexander City, Alabama	Atlanta	4.0
Jackson, Alabama	Atlanta	4.0
Carroll, Iowa	Kansas City	4.0
North Adams, Massachusetts	Boston	4.1
Quincy, Illinois	Chicago	4.2
Greenville, Mississippi	Atlanta	4.3
Astoria, Oregon	Seattle	4.3
Superior, Wisconsin	Chicago	4.6

Source: SSA’s Management Information Central system.

Table C–2: Field Offices with the Longest Average Wait Time (in Minutes) in FY 2019

Office Name	Region	Average Wait Time
Anchorage, Alaska	Seattle	53.1
Vancouver, Washington	Seattle	49.9
Mount Prospect, Illinois	Chicago	49.8
Columbus North, Ohio	Chicago	49.5
Woodstock, Illinois	Chicago	49.2
Chicago Heights, Illinois	Chicago	48.9
Bloomingdale, Illinois	Chicago	47.9
Johnson County, Kansas	Kansas City	47.8
Rockville, Maryland	Philadelphia	47.1
Columbus West, Ohio	Chicago	46.6

Source: SSA’s Management Information Central system

¹ The field offices visited were (1) Alexander City, Alabama; (2) Bloomingdale, Illinois; (3) Chicago Heights, Illinois; (4) Concord, New Hampshire; (5) Johnson County, Kansas; (6) Mt. Prospect, Illinois; (7) Rockville, Maryland; and (8) Woodstock, Illinois. We visited these field offices because they were near an Office of Audit field office.

Appendix D– STEPS THE SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION IS TAKING TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO, AND REDUCE WAIT TIMES IN, FIELD OFFICES

We asked the Social Security Administration (SSA) what steps it is taking to improve customer access and reduce wait times in field offices. SSA provided the following information but did not attribute its responses to a specific individual or component unless specifically noted.

Ending the Telework Pilot

SSA’s Office of Operations (Operations) piloted telework in 72 of its field offices beginning in Fiscal Year (FY) 2014. Approximately 25 percent of its 44,000 Operations¹ employees participated in this pilot, with 328 field offices participating by FY 2020. However, Operations has faced a number of significant service challenges, which included increases in wait times for customers on the national 800-number and in field offices. As such, SSA ended its telework pilot for Operations in November 2019 to ensure it has staff on-site to meet the public’s needs.² However, SSA stated it “. . . ended the pilot, in part, because we do not have informed evaluation data, which we would need to account for a variety of productivity control factors including overtime, age and composition of workloads, employee experience, etc.” According to SSA, it “. . . ended the telework pilot to ensure we have all possible staff available on-site to serve the public.” However, because of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), SSA temporarily expanded telework on March 17, 2020 and further expanded it to all employees effective March 21, 2020.³

SSA’s Deputy Commissioner for Operations stated, “We must have the ability and flexibility to address our shifting workloads and the daily, and oftentimes emergent, needs of our frontline⁴ components. To improve our service delivery, we need to utilize every valuable resource we have in Operations and the talents that each of you bring to this Agency.” Further, SSA’s Commissioner stated that the telework pilot “. . . was implemented without necessary controls or data collection to evaluate effectiveness or impact on public service.”⁵

¹ SSA told us that, in addition to those who work in field offices, employees in Operations components at Headquarters also participated in the telework pilot.

² SSA, *A Message about Improving Service from Andrew Saul, Commissioner of Social Security--PRESS RELEASE* (November 4, 2019).

³ The only exception to this nationwide telework requirement is for employees whose supervisors explicitly instructed them that their physical presence is required because of their responsibilities.

⁴ SSA refers to field office and teleservice center employees as “frontline employees.”

⁵ See Footnote 2.

Restoring Field Office Hours on Wednesdays

Because of budget cuts and a hiring freeze in 2013, SSA field office staff was provided additional time when visitors were not accepted to complete work, such as processing claims and post-entitlement actions. SSA provided its employees this time by closing its field offices to visitors on Wednesdays from 12:00 to 4:00 p.m., which allowed staff time to adjudicate pending claims and make progress on medical continuing disability reviews,⁶ annual wage reports,⁷ redeterminations,⁸ limited issues,⁹ and other workloads that improved the accuracy of SSA's payments. SSA stated it "... reduced field office public hours at a time of significant budget challenges and it is time to return to normal hours."

Effective January 8, 2020, SSA restored public service hours on Wednesdays from 12:00 to 4:00 p.m.¹⁰ According to SSA's Deputy Commissioner for Operations, restoring these hours will increase its appointment availability and its ability to service walk-in customers. SSA's Deputy Commissioner for Operations stated, "This will better meet public needs and expectations of access to government offices." However, effective March 17, 2020, SSA temporarily closed its offices to the public because of COVID-19.¹¹

Increased Hiring and Overtime

Because of funding increases over the last several years, SSA's Deputy Commissioner for Operations stated it has been able "... to replace staffing losses and work a significant amount of overtime to address pending workloads." SSA stated it recognizes that the sooner it can employ and train new hires in the front lines, the sooner those employees can help handle the public service workloads. In FY 2020, SSA plans to hire approximately 6,000 new employees to serve the public in field offices, the national 800-number, processing centers, and the disability determination services. This hiring replaces staffing losses in those components plus an additional 1,100 people for the national 800-number and in the processing centers to address

⁶ SSA completes medical continuing disability reviews to determine whether an individual's disability has ceased. SSA, *POMS*, DI 28001.001, A (May 15, 2015).

⁷ Each year, employers submit to SSA reports that show the wages paid to each employee during the previous year. SSA, *POMS*, RM 03870.001, B.1 (October 1, 1998).

⁸ A redetermination is a review of non-medical eligibility factors (that is, income, resources, and living arrangements) to determine whether the recipient is still eligible for and receiving the correct Supplemental Security Income payment. SSA, *POMS*, SI 02305.001, A (September 5, 2019).

⁹ Limited issues are cases that require development of a specific issue or event without conducting a redetermination. SSA, *POMS*, SI 02305.015, A.1 (January 8, 2008).

¹⁰ Andrew Saul, Commissioner, *Expanding Social Security Field Office Hours*, SSA, blog.ssa.gov (December 2, 2019).

¹¹ SSA, *Social Security & Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)*, ssa.gov (last visited April 21, 2020).

some of SSA's most critical service issues. The President's FY 2021 Budget will allow SSA to maintain its increased frontline¹² staffing levels and make further service improvements.

Modernizing Technology

In October 2017, SSA published its Information Technology Modernization Plan, which describes its initiatives to replace its core systems with modern systems that enhance the customer experience. As part of this plan, SSA stated it "... will use agile software development to reengineer our business processes by optimizing end-to-end processing, redesigning workflows, reducing manual transactions, and using analytics to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of our programs."¹³

Our February 2018 audit of *Customer Wait Times in the Social Security Administration's Field Offices* (A-04-18-50260) stated that many initiatives in SSA's Information Technology Modernization Plan "... are not expected to be implemented until 2022 or later."¹⁴ We strongly encouraged SSA to take action sooner than its planned modernization rollout to address its customer wait times because of the historically high number of customers who waited longer than 1 hour and the expected significant increase in the number of customers through 2025. We stated, "In the interim, SSA should use its technology, at an enterprise-wide level, to identify high-stress offices and transfer eligible workloads, based on Agency priorities, on a real-time basis."¹⁵

We asked SSA how its Information Technology Modernization Plan addresses customer service wait times and the timeframe in which these changes will be implemented. According to SSA, it is streamlining its workflows, automating its work using modern technology, and providing new service options to the public. SSA stated that "... these actions will contribute to improving wait times in the field office and telephone service channels." SSA provided the following new self-service options with planned implementation dates.

- Representative Payee Online Wage Reporting – A new service implemented in *my Social Security* in FY 2019 that allows representative payees to report wages for the beneficiaries they represent. It delivers convenience and security for representative payees and efficiency for SSA's technicians. SSA noted that, as of January 2020, 2.5 million representative payees have a *my Social Security* account.
- Retirement Calculator – A new service implemented in *my Social Security* in FY 2019 that allows people to estimate their retirement benefit and run multiple scenarios to view the impact that changing earnings have on their benefits. According to SSA, "This service

¹² See Footnote 4.

¹³ SSA, OIG, *Customer Wait Times in the Social Security Administration's Field Offices*, A-04-18-50260, p. C-2 (February 2018).

¹⁴ See Footnote 13, p. 10.

¹⁵ See Footnote 13, p. 10.

enables non-beneficiaries to plan, customize, and save future benefit scenarios in their *my Social Security* account.”

- Digital Identity – An existing service that has improvements planned for implementation in FY 2020, which will increase the success rate of people creating *my Social Security* accounts online. SSA stated, “Improving registration and authentication processes and technology will enable broader access to secure, convenient self-service options.” As of January 2020, 46.5 million individuals have a *my Social Security* account, which is an increase of 7 million accounts over the prior year.
- Internet Social Security Number Replacement Card Expansion – SSA anticipates continued expansion in FY 2020 from the current 40 States and the District of Columbia, with a goal to include all 50 States. SSA noted that in FY 2019, it completed 1.3 million successful Replacement Card requests and expanded use of Replacement Cards to individuals in the States of Alaska, Georgia, Hawaii, Kansas, New Jersey, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

SSA also provided several initiatives for automating modern workflows.

- Online Social Security Number Application – A new service planned for FY 2020, which will allow individuals to begin their requests for an original Social Security number or replacement Social Security card online. When an individual visits the field office, the technician can retrieve the application information, verify the individual’s evidence, and complete the application. SSA stated, “This service will reduce the field office time needed to input individuals’ information and complete the transaction. Ultimately, as the future availability of online verification/authentication of evidence via links with other federal and state agencies expands, we will automate evidence verification to the fullest extent possible to further reduce the need for field office visits.”
- Streamlined Benefit Verification Letter Processing – According to SSA, Benefit Verification Letters (BEVE) are one of the highest volume in-office workloads. SSA has two initiatives that are expected to reduce either the volume of requests or the time required by beneficiaries and technicians to process the requests.
 - Representative Payee BEVE – A new service that is being implemented in *my Social Security* in FY 2020 that will allow representative payees to get BEVEs online for the beneficiaries they represent.
 - Express BEVE – A new process that SSA was testing as of January 2020 in one Chicago field office. In the field office, beneficiaries can request a BEVE using a kiosk and pick up the BEVE at an “express” window where SSA verifies the receiver’s identity. If Express BEVE is deemed successful, SSA plans to expand it to future sites.
- Claim Status Inquiry Improvements – SSA stated, “Claim status inquiries are one of the highest volume inquiries in a field office and on the telephone.” SSA has two initiatives that are expected to reduce the volume of requests handled.

- Claim Status Change Notifications – In late November 2019, SSA began testing a notification process for certain online claim filers. These individuals receive an email when their claim status changes, inviting them to log on to *my Social Security* and check their claim status.
- Automated Telephone Claim Status Application – In FY 2020, SSA plans “. . . to improve the automated telephone claim status inquiry to enable more people to use self-service over the telephone.” In FY 2019, SSA stated that 174,000 callers completed their request for claim status via its national 800-number’s automated interactive voice response application.

SSA has also created the Individual Representative Payee Portal for *my Social Security* account holders who also serve as representative payees. This Portal allows representative payees the ability to conduct business online for the beneficiaries they represent, which will relieve some of the workload on field office staff. SSA expanded the Portal in January 2020 by enabling representative payees to generate, print, save, and/or request a mailed copy of the benefits verification letter, which will also save time for field office staff.

Limiting Imposter Scam Effects on Front-line Operations

SSA has collaborated with OIG and major telephone carriers to block many calls from reaching the public. SSA stated it continues collaborating with OIG daily on multiple fronts. For example, the Agency worked with OIG to create an online reporting form to better collect information related to scams. It included language about the scams on the online form on its national 800-number and field office messaging so all customers are educated about telephone scams. SSA stated it continues to support OIG to streamline the OIG Fraud Hotline messaging. In addition, SSA is working closely with OIG to educate the public about the telephone scams. According to SSA, these activities have reduced the imposter calls to its national 800-number. In October 2019, OIG’s Fraud Hotline transferred over 92,000 callers to SSA’s general service line. By March 2020, the volume declined to 700 transferred calls.

Appendix E – AGENCY COMMENTS



SOCIAL SECURITY

MEMORANDUM

Date: June 11, 2020 Refer To: S1J-3

To: Gail S. Ennis
Inspector General

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Stephanie Hall".

From: Stephanie Hall
Chief of Staff

Subject: Office of the Inspector General Draft Congressional Response Report, "Social Security Administration's Field Office Customer Service" (A-08-20-50898) -- INFORMATION

Thank you for the opportunity to review the draft report. Commissioner Saul's plan to emphasize and restore fundamental public service remains his highest priority. Last fall, the Commissioner strategically shifted resources to the agency's front lines, directing the hiring of hundreds of frontline staff. The Commissioner also continues to drive service delivery improvements by advancing technological and business process updates to ensure timely and accurate service, and to make doing business with us easier. We intend to improve service delivery across all channels, including enhancing and expanding self-service options online and over the phone.

To expedite in-office service, we plan for approximately 1,900 new hires in our field offices (FOs). Once trained, these employees will improve service in critical areas and contribute to more timely service and reduced wait times. We will also refine our FO business processes and tools. For example, we will identify and route visitors with certain routine requests, such as replacement Social Security number cards, for express service to minimize the number of people waiting for service. Additionally, we will enhance the Visitor Intake Process Re-write (VIPr) application, which tracks data regarding our customers' visits, to include more detailed interview topics and questions. With better screening, we can ensure customers see the technician best prepared to handle their business, leading to increased efficiency and reduced wait times. Another new VIPr feature will show customers their expected wait time. We will also continue

to train and remind employees of VIPr procedures and reinforce the importance of capturing accurate information about customer wait times.

This year—during this review—we closed FOs to the public to assist in keeping our employees and the public safe during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we quickly transitioned our workforce to maximum telework to continue to serve our customers. Despite this and other future challenges we face, we will continuously seek opportunities to expand and improve the service we provide to the public.

Please let me know if we can be of further assistance. You may direct staff inquiries to Trae Sommer at (410) 965-9102.

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