

The Social Security Administration's Field Office Consolidation Decision Process

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To assess the Social Security Administration's (SSA) process for evaluating field offices for consolidation.

Background

According to SSA, in November 2013, it implemented a new process for evaluating field offices to ensure service delivery is consistent with the needs of the areas served. This process begins with an Area Director's annual review of each field office for which they are responsible. The annual review compiles such information as whether the office was leased or owned, average number of monthly visitors, and number of field office employees. If the Area Director determines additional analysis is necessary to determine whether a change is needed, a Service Area Review (SAR) may be conducted. A SAR is a complete office assessment that includes a review of the office's demographic and workload factors, accessibility, and other unique or special needs. SARs help SSA determine whether it should upgrade, downgrade, or consolidate field offices. SARs also help SSA determine whether it should realign field offices into and out of an existing area or make no change.

However, an investigation by the Senate Special Committee on Aging found SSA "... could not provide a decision maker with data needed to make a sound decision ..." to justify field office consolidations. The Committee's investigation included a review of 19 field offices SSA consolidated in Fiscal Year (FY) 2014. The Committee made several recommendations.

Findings

Of the 19 field offices consolidated in FY 2014, 18 were consolidated under the SAR process SSA implemented in November 2013. In general, we found the SAR process resulted in consistent documentation of SSA's evaluation of field offices. As part of our review, SSA also provided documentation outlining its justifications for consolidating the 18 field offices. Based on our review of the justifications, SSA included the primary factors considered for consolidating each office but did not include all of the information required by SSA policy.

Because of the Senate Special Committee on Aging's investigation, SSA plans to further update its process to evaluate field offices for consolidation. These changes should address the Committee's five recommendations. However, because SSA's field offices provide the public with a variety of services, SSA must also improve its justification to support consolidating field offices. Specifically, SSA should ensure the justification includes all information required by its policy.

Recommendation

We recommend SSA ensure future justifications for field office consolidations include all the information required by its policy to ensure informed decisionmaking and improve transparency to stakeholders.

SSA agreed with our recommendation.