

*Audit Report*

The Social Security Administration's  
Reduction in Field Office Operating  
Hours

A-01-14-14039 / August 2014

# OIG

Office of the Inspector General  
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

## MEMORANDUM

Date: August 7, 2014 Refer To:

To: The Commissioner

From: Inspector General

Subject: The Social Security Administration's Reduction in Field Office Operating Hours  
(A-01-14-14039)

The attached final report presents the results of our audit. Our objective was to determine the effect of the Social Security Administration's decision to reduce field office hours to the public.

If you wish to discuss the final report, please call me or have your staff contact Steven L. Schaeffer, Assistant Inspector General for Audit, at (410) 965-9700.



Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr.

Attachment

# The Social Security Administration's Reduction in Field Office Operating Hours

## A-01-14-14039



August 2014

Office of Audit Report Summary

### Objective

To determine the effect of the Social Security Administration's (SSA) decision to reduce field office (FO) hours to the public.

### Background

FOs are SSA's primary points of contact for face-to-face service with the public. In August 2011, SSA began closing FOs (nationwide) 30 minutes earlier each day. In November 2012, SSA extended these early closures to 1 hour. In January 2013, SSA further reduced FO hours by closing every Wednesday at noon. With the reduced hours, FOs were open to the public 27 hours compared to the previous 35 hours per week.

Since Fiscal Year 2011, SSA has experienced increased workloads as well as decreased staffing levels and budgets. Therefore, SSA took measures to continue providing adequate service to the public, including reducing FO hours. Although the FO is closed to the public, SSA staff continues working. According to SSA, the reduced public hours allow staff to complete face-to-face interviews and process claims with reduced overtime costs.

### Our Findings

The public was sometimes unaware and personally affected by the reduced FO hours. Consequently, the public's satisfaction with FO hours decreased. In addition, some FO managers reported that the reduced public hours generally improved workload processing as well as staff training and morale. However, some FO managers reported drawbacks from the reduced public hours, such as increased wait times, crowded lobbies, and limited appointment availability.

SSA should continue communicating FO hours and other service methods, such as the National 800-Number and Website, to the public, other government agencies, and service organizations.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

CDR	Continuing Disability Review
FO	Field Office
FY	Fiscal Year
GAO	Government Accountability Office
IRS	Internal Revenue Service
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
OQP	Office of Quality Performance
OQR	Office of Quality Review
RCF	Regional Commissioner Field
SSA	Social Security Administration
SSI	Supplemental Security Income
SSN	Social Security Number
USPS	United States Postal Service
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs

## OBJECTIVE

Our objective was to determine the effect of the Social Security Administration's (SSA) decision to reduce field office (FO) hours to the public.

## BACKGROUND

FOs are SSA's primary points of contact for face-to-face service with the public. In August 2011, SSA began closing FOs (nationwide) 30 minutes earlier each day. In November 2012, SSA extended these early closures to 1 hour. In January 2013, SSA further reduced FO hours by closing every Wednesday at noon. With the reduced hours, FOs were open to the public 27 hours compared to the previous 35 hours per week.

SSA maintains about 1,200 FOs that vary in size and number of visitors.<sup>1</sup> For example in Fiscal Year (FY) 2013, the Huron, South Dakota, FO averaged 19 visitors per day, and the Miami South, Florida, FO averaged 568 visitors per day.<sup>2</sup> FO services to the public include

- processing Social Security number (SSN) or replacement SSN card applications;<sup>3</sup>
- taking applications and determining eligibility (non-medical only) for Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits;
- conducting continuing non-medical eligibility reviews to ensure payment accuracy;<sup>4</sup> and
- performing various other functions, such as updating beneficiary records or answering telephone calls.<sup>5</sup>

Since FY 2011, SSA has experienced increased workloads as well as decreased staffing levels and budgets.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, SSA took measures to continue providing adequate service to the public, including reducing FO hours. Although the FO is closed to the public, SSA staff

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<sup>1</sup> SSA also provides limited services to the public through contact stations. Station employees travel to specific locations, such as hospitals, and provide face-to-face service to communities far from an FO.

<sup>2</sup> SSA, MI Central, *Customer Service Record Performance Reports*.

<sup>3</sup> SSA refers to the processing of these applications as its enumeration workload.

<sup>4</sup> SSA refers to these as continuing disability review (CDR) and redetermination workloads. In FY 2013, SSA completed approximately 429,000 full medical CDRs and over 2.6 million SSI non-medical redeterminations. SSA, *FY 2013 Agency Financial Report*, December 2013, p. 8. Disability determination services (not the FOs) evaluate whether a person is disabled.

<sup>5</sup> In FY 2013, FOs received over 68 million calls nationwide. SSA, *FY 2015 Budget Overview*, March 2014, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> In FYs 2011 and 2012, the difference between the President's Budget and SSA's appropriation was greater than any year in the previous 2 decades. SSA, *Service Delivery Plan*, February 2013, pgs. 2 and 3. According to SSA, decreased funding made it impossible to provide the overtime needed to service the public as the Agency had done in the past. SSA News Release, *Social Security Field Offices to Begin Closing to the Public a Half Hour Early*, July 22, 2011.

continues working. According to SSA, the reduced public hours allow staff to complete face-to-face interviews and process claims with reduced overtime costs.<sup>7</sup>

To notify the public of the reduced FO hours, SSA issued a national press release and local press releases to advocates, third parties, and the media. In addition, SSA posted signs at the FOs and updated telephone messages and the SSA Website with the new FO hours.

According to SSA's Office of Quality Review (OQR), the public's satisfaction with FO hours decreased from 93 percent in 2011 to 87 percent in 2012.<sup>8</sup> OQR attributed this to the reduced public hours.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to FOs, SSA provides the following service options: the National 800-Number at 1-800-772-1213 and Website at [www.ssa.gov](http://www.ssa.gov) (see Appendix A for more information). However, the number of visitors to the FOs remains high. In FY 2013, FOs assisted over 43 million visitors—slightly less than the prior 2 years. See Table 1.

**Table 1: Total FO Visitors by Day of the Week<sup>10</sup>**

Fiscal Year	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday and Sunday <sup>11</sup>	Total
2011	9,339,735	9,753,629	9,017,047	8,398,812	8,356,508	12,206	<b>44,877,937</b>
2012	9,117,969	9,781,772	8,894,613	8,623,890	8,448,548	3,478	<b>44,870,270</b>
2013	8,984,719	9,495,050	<b>6,405,847</b>	9,358,891	8,981,626	5,997	<b>43,232,130</b>

To accomplish our objective, we

- ✓ contacted FO managers for feedback about the reduced hours and their effect on the public, staff, and workloads;
- ✓ observed 18 FOs at closing time on a Wednesday at noon and spoke with 79 individuals who arrived after the FOs closed; and
- ✓ reviewed the hours of other Federal agencies that also served the public.

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<sup>7</sup> SSA News Release, *Social Security Field Offices to Close to the Public a Half Hour Early Each Day and at Noon on Wednesdays*, November 7, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> SSA Office of Quality Performance (OQP), *Report on the Fiscal Year 2012 Office Visitor Survey: Field and Hearing Office Analysis*, September 2013, p. 2. The report uses a 6-point satisfaction scale: excellent, very good, and good that equates to satisfaction; and fair, poor, and very poor that equates to dissatisfaction. OQP was renamed the Office of Quality Review (OQR).

<sup>9</sup> Id.

<sup>10</sup> SSA, MI Central, *Customer Service Record Performance Reports*.

<sup>11</sup> According to SSA, there are times when FOs need to schedule weekend appointments (using overtime) to process SSI redeterminations and medical CDRs.

See Appendix B for more information about our scope and methodology.

## RESULTS OF REVIEW

The public was sometimes unaware and personally affected by the reduced FO hours.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the public's satisfaction with FO hours decreased. In addition, some FO managers reported that the reduced public hours generally improved workload processing as well as staff training and morale. However, some FO managers reported drawbacks from the reduced public hours, such as increased wait times, crowded lobbies, and limited appointment availability.

### The Public

#### *Awareness of FO Hours*

Some of the public was unaware of the reduced FO hours. According to FO managers, the number of individuals who arrived after the FO closed ranged from none to over 25 per week. See Table 2.

**Table 2: Individuals Arriving After FO Closed Per Week**

Average Number of Individuals Arriving After FO Closed Per Week	Number of Managers Reporting	Percent of Managers Reporting
0 Individuals	212	21%
1-5 Individuals	259	25%
6-10 Individuals	152	15%
11-15 Individuals	109	11%
16-20 Individuals	87	8%
21-25 Individuals	45	4%
Over 25 Individuals	164	16%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,028</b>	<b>100%</b>

During our FO visits, we observed individuals who arrived after the FO closed.<sup>13</sup> We spoke with 79 of these individuals, and 33 (42 percent) reported that was their first visit to the FO. An FO manager commented that a majority of the American public visits an FO "...a few times in their lifetime"; therefore, these individuals were largely unaware of FO hours.

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<sup>12</sup> These results do not represent all individuals who do business at the FO. These results are a snapshot of individuals who were at the FO on a Wednesday after closing and willing to talk to us.

<sup>13</sup> We observed 18 FOs and counted a range of 1 to over 25 individuals who arrived after the FO closed while we were present.

In some instances, non-SSA Websites, SSA correspondence, SSA staff, and other agencies could have better communicated FO hours to the public. Of the 79 individuals we spoke with, some commented they were unaware of FO hours. Their reasons were as follows.

- Non-SSA Websites listed the FO hours incorrectly.<sup>14</sup> An individual stated that a non-SSA Website provided incorrect FO hours. We viewed the Website and confirmed the FO hours were incorrect.
- SSA correspondence did not include FO hours. An individual stated a letter from SSA instructed him to bring paperwork to the FO, but it had no specifics about FO hours.
- SSA staff did not communicate FO hours. An individual stated he called the FO on a Wednesday morning to inform the caseworker he would arrive around 12:30 p.m. The individual alleged the caseworker did not mention the FO closed at 12:00 p.m.
- Other government agencies did not communicate FO hours.<sup>15</sup> An individual stated that on a Wednesday, a State agency sent her directly to the FO regarding a parent's death; however, they did not mention the FO was closed.
- The individual confirmed FO hours but did not notice that Wednesday's hours were different than the hours on other days of the week. (For further details on public feedback, see Appendix C.)

An FO manager commented that non-SSA Websites with incorrect hours caused frustration. For example, the manager described individuals who arrived after the FO closed, screamed at the guard, and showed non-SSA Websites with incorrect hours on their smartphone.<sup>16</sup> This FO manager contacted a person at one non-SSA Website and requested the site correct its information on FO hours. It took 4 months for the website to be updated to display the correct FO hours.

Some FO managers reported that the public seemed to be more aware of the reduced hours. For example, a manager commented that, initially, there were some complaints about the early closing—usually in person. However, the public was becoming more aware of FO hours, and there were no recent complaints. Furthermore, some FO managers reported receiving complaints about FO hours even before SSA reduced operating hours.

SSA instructed FO managers to update signs with the reduced public hours. During our 18 FO observations, 1 FO had no sign that listed public hours. Another FO had numerous signs with differing public hours listed.

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<sup>14</sup> SSA does not assume responsibility for information posted to non-SSA Websites.

<sup>15</sup> SSA does not assume responsibility for information provided by non-SSA employees.

<sup>16</sup> At some of the FOs, we observed security guards speaking with individuals who arrived after the FO closed and informing them of the public hours. In a few instances, we observed guards handle upset individuals. After the reduction in public hours, a couple of FOs reported adding an extra security guard.

## *Individuals Affected by Reduced FO Hours*

Some of the 79 individuals we spoke with commented on how the reduced hours personally affected them. Their comments included the following.

- Taking time off work, as public hours were inconvenient for individuals who worked.
- Being in pain after taking two commuter lines to get to the FO. One individual commented that she would experience even more pain because she had to come back the next day.
- Paying for transportation to and from the closed FO and having to pay for transportation to and from the FO to come back the next day.

An FO manager commented that many individuals lived miles away and complained about driving in, wasting time off work, and using gas only to find the FO closed. Another FO manager commented that, despite signage and marketing efforts, frustrated customers were routinely in the parking lot Wednesday afternoons. According to this manager, the FO averaged between 16 and 20 cars arriving every Wednesday afternoon after the FO closed, and that number had not diminished over time. Additionally, the next day, customers would comment, “I even took off from work to come down here.”<sup>17</sup>

## **FO Manager Feedback**

Of the 1,172 FO managers contacted, 1,028 (88 percent) provided feedback about the reduced FO hours and the effect on the public, staff, and workloads.<sup>18</sup>

### *Reduced FO Hours - Benefits*

Of the 1,028 FO managers’ responses, some reported that the reduced public hours were beneficial. For example, FO managers’ comments included that the reduced hours

- allowed staff to concentrate on complex cases without interruptions;
- enabled the FO to address multiple workloads and training needs as well as conduct staff meetings, which balanced FO workloads, improved employee morale, and improved overall public service;
- facilitated training sessions and backlog processing;
- enabled the FO to maintain the high standard of productivity and quality that SSA expects and the American public deserves, even with limited staffing and overtime;

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<sup>17</sup> FO managers reported receiving a range of zero to over 25 complaints per week. According to FO managers, most individuals voiced their opinion in person or by telephone.

<sup>18</sup> An effective response rate for questionnaires ranges between 75 to 95 percent. GAO, *Developing and Using Questionnaires* (GAO-PEMD-10.1.7), October 1, 1993, p. 203.

- made a significant difference in staff morale and the ability to process work in a timely manner, as staff felt less stressed. Before the change in public hours, FO staff typically interviewed customers until 5:15 p.m. After the change, staff typically interviewed customers until 4:30 p.m., which allowed for more time to complete tasks that did not require face-to-face contact with individuals; and
- facilitated working on priority workloads. See Table 3.

**Table 3: Top Five Workloads Addressed When Closed to the Public per FO Managers<sup>19</sup>**

Workloads Addressed	Number of FO Managers Reported	Percent of FO Managers
Redeterminations	958	93%
Post-Entitlement	932	91%
CDRs	923	90%
Initial Claims	879	86%
Interviews with Customers <sup>20</sup>	811	79%

### *Reduced FO Hours - Drawbacks*

Of the 1,028 FO managers' responses to the reduced hours, some reported the following drawbacks.

- They did not reduce the number of visitors SSA must serve. For example, in July 2011 (the month before the initial half hour reduction in hours), an FO served a weekly average of 1,143 visitors. In October 2012, (the month before the second half hour reduction in hours), this FO served a weekly average of 1,251 visitors. Finally, in November 2013, (after the Wednesday noon closure), this FO served a weekly average of 1,163 visitors.
- They resulted in no gain on workload processing. The reduced hours just compressed the FO's traffic into a shorter timeframe and resulted in the same work as before.
- They created a second busy, stressful day on Thursday because individuals who arrived to the closed FO on Wednesday often returned on Thursday in a frustrated mood. Traditionally, Monday was the busiest, most stressful day.
- Average public wait times increased. For example, in July 2011, an FO's average wait time was 14.4 minutes. In October 2012, the wait time increased to 17.9 minutes. In November 2013, the wait time increased to 30.5 minutes—more than double the wait time before the reduction in hours began.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Other workloads addressed included staff training and meetings, enumeration, appeals, and income verification.

<sup>20</sup> At 17 FOs, we observed customers remaining in the lobby and receiving assistance after the FO closed at noon.

<sup>21</sup> FO manager response may not include other factors effecting public wait times, such as staff attrition.

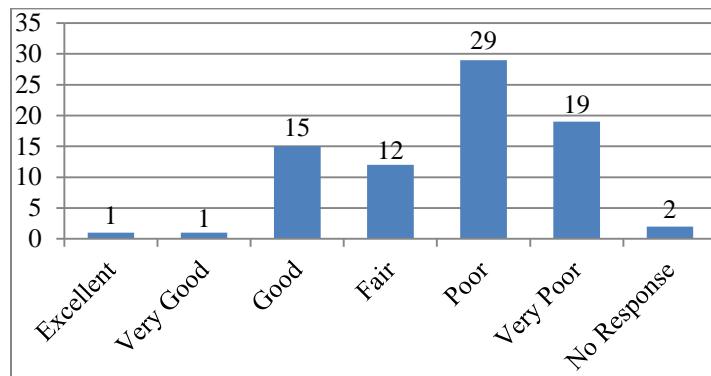
- Increased customer complaints about having to wait so long for service, be it in-office or by telephone.
- They created customer lines out the FO door because of insufficient lobby seating to handle the increased visitor volume per hour. At times, visitors waited outside in the rain.
- They limited appointment availability. Before the reduced hours, the FO scheduled five or six appointments daily. With the reduced hours, the FO scheduled three or four appointments daily. Therefore, the appointment calendar was usually booked for the entire 60-day period.
- They shifted resources away from appointments to answer telephones or assist at the front counter so citizens did not wait 1 hour or longer for help.

Since 2011, SSA's staff size had decreased by nearly 11,000 employees. According to SSA, overall service suffered.<sup>22</sup> As a result, in FY 2013, the public waited longer for a decision on their disability claim, to talk to a representative on the National 800-Number, and to schedule an appointment at the FO.<sup>23</sup> For example, FO wait times for individuals without appointments increased nationwide from 18 minutes in FY 2011 to 25 minutes in FY 2013.<sup>24</sup>

## Public Satisfaction with FO Hours

Of the 79 individuals we spoke with, 48 (61 percent) rated FO hours as poor or very poor. See Figure 1.

**Figure 1: FO Hour Rating by Individuals Who Arrived After Closure**



Several FO managers suggested that SSA modify FO hours. For example, they suggested that the FO (a) be closed completely 1 day a week, (b) be closed completely 1 day a week and its hours be expanded on other days; or (c) revert to original hours. Manager comments included

<sup>22</sup> SSA, *FY 2015 Budget Overview*, March 2014, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Id.

<sup>24</sup> SSA, MI Central, *Customer Service Record Performance Reports*.

- implementing a full day closure when feasible;
- changing the early closure to a Monday or Friday (instead of Wednesday) to minimize the effect of creating two Mondays—as Thursdays became busier than Mondays at some FOs;
- closing FOs 1 afternoon or 1 full day a week could have less of an effect, if SSA opened FOs 1 evening each week; and
- having FOs revert to previous hours: “While the shorter hours may be good for us, they certainly are not good for our customers.”

## Face-to-Face and Other Service Options

Most Social Security transactions do not require a visit to an FO.<sup>25</sup> For example, anyone wishing to apply for benefits, sign up for direct deposit, or replace a Medicare card may do so by calling SSA’s National 800-Number or using the Internet.

Of the 79 individuals we spoke with, 31 (39 percent) were unaware of SSA’s other service options.<sup>26</sup> Whether aware or unaware of other options, some individuals preferred face-to-face service. For example, we spoke with

- ✓ an individual who was in a wheelchair and arrived after the FO closed. She thought the FO closed at 3:00 p.m., not at 12:00 p.m., on Wednesdays. Although there was an FO closer to her home, she depended on the bus for transportation, which did not go to the closer location. In addition, this individual preferred to conduct business in person.
- ✓ an Army recruiter who escorted a potential recruit to the closed FO and who commented that SSA’s other service options were not as good as in person.

According to OQR, in FY 2012, 85 percent of FO visitors responded that they would most likely conduct future business with SSA locally.<sup>27</sup> See Table 4. Additionally, SSA conducted a survey in FY 2013 and asked prospective customers if they would ever contact or do business with the

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<sup>25</sup> As of April 2014, not all SSA transactions could be completed on the Internet or over the telephone. For example, individuals must complete SSI applications at the FO. SSA plans to implement the SSI Internet application within the next 3 to 5 years. SSA, *Service Delivery Plan*, February 2013, p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> The 31 individuals not aware of SSA’s other service options, includes 3 individuals who provided no response. Of the 79 individuals with whom we spoke, 32 came to the FO to obtain an SSN card, which must be acquired in person.

<sup>27</sup> SSA OQP, *Report on the Fiscal Year 2012 Office Visitor Survey: Field and Hearing Office Analysis*, September 2013, p. 4. OQP was renamed OQR.

Agency using one of the three main service delivery channels: telephone, office visit, or Internet. See Table 5.<sup>28</sup>

**Table 4: FO Visitors – Next Social Security Contact<sup>29</sup>**

FO Visitors Would Most Likely...	FY 2012
Visit a local FO	66%
Call a local FO	19%
Call the National 800-Number	8%
Use the Internet or Email	5%
Other	1%

**Table 5: Would You Ever Use This Method to Conduct Social Security Business?**

Contact Method	Percent Yes
Telephone	88%
Visit	83%
Internet	75%

## Overtime

With the struggle to meet the public's demand for service, the Agency targeted much of its overtime to program integrity workloads. According to SSA, FO managers directed staff to focus efforts on workloads such as CDRs and redeterminations. From FYs 2010 to 2013, SSA decreased the Regional Commissioner—Field (RCF) overtime costs by more than \$53 million and reduced FO staffing by over 4,000 work years.<sup>30</sup> See Table 6.

**Table 6: RCF Overtime Costs**

	FY 2010	FY 2011	FY 2012	FY 2013
<b>Total RCF Overtime Costs (millions)</b>	\$126.0	\$80.0	\$80.1	\$72.6
<b>Total RCF Workyears (staff and overtime)</b>	38,105	37,314	35,368	33,966

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<sup>28</sup> The survey sample included 10,000 individuals age 50 to 64 selected from a database of the general U.S. population maintained by a private company. Of the 10,000, 3,996 individuals completed the survey questionnaire. SSA Office of Budget, Finance, Quality, and Management, *Fiscal Year 2013 Prospective Client Survey Report*, June 2014, pgs. 1 and 5.

<sup>29</sup> Because of rounding, Table 4 totals 99 percent.

<sup>30</sup> At our request, SSA provided overtime information. In general, SSA defines a work year as 2,080 straight-time hours or their equivalent.

## SSA's Plans for Future Service and Delivery

According to SSA, the public is becoming accustomed to self-service options, including those offered through smartphones and the Internet. To capitalize on this trend, SSA plans to increase the number and type of self-service *choices* offered.<sup>31</sup> SSA stated these efforts will help reduce FO foot traffic, enabling employees to better serve those who need or want face-to-face service.<sup>32</sup>

- National 800-Number—SSA enhanced the system so more callers can successfully complete business via telephone. The two major phases of this enhancement are: Phase I—live-agent service and Phase II—automated and enhanced services. SSA implemented Phase I in FY 2013 and expects to complete Phase II in FY 2014.<sup>33</sup>
- *my Social Security*—SSA plans to enhance *my Social Security* to facilitate requests for replacement Social Security cards and provide optional online notice delivery.<sup>34</sup>
- SSA Express—SSA plans to install SSA Express icons on over 6,000 public computers in over 170 facilities nationwide. For example, in January 2014, SSA collaborated with State and local organizations in the Denver Region and installed SSA Express on 14 public computers.<sup>35</sup>
- Video Service Delivery—SSA plans to expand the use of Video Service Delivery to improve public service and reduce foot traffic in the FOs. In FY 2013, SSA maintained video units at 423 sites and held 181,675 video interviews.<sup>36</sup>

In addition, SSA plans to incorporate additional service options that would allow the Agency to support multiple communication channels. For example, SSA plans to enhance systems so customers can engage in email and live computer chat with SSA personnel.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> SSA, *FY 2015 Budget Overview*, March 2014, p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Id. at p. 17. According to SSA, in FY 2014, it plans to replace employees who left and some—but not all—of the losses from prior years. Id. at p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> Id. at p. 14.

<sup>34</sup> Id. at p. 17. *my Social Security* is a personalized online account that allows individuals to conduct business on the Internet without having to visit an FO, make a telephone call, or use regular mail.

<sup>35</sup> SSA, *Component Report*, January 28, 2014, p. 11. According to SSA, SSA Express is a collaborative effort to offer several self-help options to the public. One SSA Express initiative is a desktop icon installed on self-service workstations at other government agencies and community service centers. For example, if an individual applied for public assistance of some sort, he or she could immediately print an SSA benefit verification document using the SSA Express icon on a self-service workstation at the facility, which could be necessary to complete the application.

<sup>36</sup> SSA, *FY 2015 Budget Overview*, March 2014, pgs. 14 and 15. Video Service Delivery is a method to serve individuals in remote locations who might otherwise have to travel long distances to reach an SSA FO.

<sup>37</sup> Id. at p. 18.

Fiscal responsibilities require that SSA determine efficient and cost-effective service delivery approaches. Since FY 2009, SSA has reported that it reduced its real estate by 36 overall offices and will save approximately \$119 million in rent and guard support over a 10-year period.<sup>38</sup>

According to SSA, the Agency will continue adjusting physical office structure to reflect the Agency's online service emphasis, while continuing to provide face-to-face service for those customers whose business requires it.<sup>39</sup> In addition, SSA recognizes that not everyone is comfortable or able to interact with the Agency in an automated fashion.<sup>40</sup>

## ***Other Federal Agencies***

In May 2013, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) recommended that SSA develop a long-term strategy for service delivery and explore the utility and feasibility of realigning its Headquarters, regional, and FO structure.<sup>41</sup> GAO also suggested SSA contact other Federal agencies to learn about their experiences restructuring.<sup>42</sup> In March 2014, SSA informed us that it was evaluating its organizational structure and developing a long-term strategy for service delivery.

We reviewed other Federal agencies that serve the public and found the following.

- The United States Postal Service (USPS) implemented efficiency measures and aligned staffing levels with projected mail volume. In the first 9 months of FY 2013, the USPS consolidated 104 mail-processing facilities and reduced operating hours at 7,397 post offices. In addition, the USPS continued taking advantage of e-commerce and increasing its shipping business.<sup>43</sup>
- The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) consolidated real estate and promoted Internet transactions. In FY 2014, the IRS plans to close, consolidate, and reduce real estate space.<sup>44</sup> In addition, the IRS Website informed taxpayers that if an issue cannot be handled online or by telephone to go to a Taxpayer Assistance Center.

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<sup>38</sup> SSA, *Service Delivery Plan*, February 2013, p. 30.

<sup>39</sup> SSA, *Strategic Plan 2014-2018*, March 2014, p. 10.

<sup>40</sup> SSA, *Service Delivery Plan*, February 2013, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> GAO, *Social Security Administration, Long-Term Strategy Needed to Address Key Management Challenges* (GAO-13-459), May 2013, pgs. 34 and 35.

<sup>42</sup> Id. at p. 35.

<sup>43</sup> USPS Release No. 13-063, *Postal Service Actions to Improve Efficiency Help to Lower Third Quarter Loss*, August 9, 2013.

<sup>44</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, *Budget in Brief, Internal Revenue Service*, FY 2014, April 2013, p. 7.

- The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) was maintaining its usual office hours for the public—as of April 2014. However, VA’s Strategic Plan included enabling a 21<sup>st</sup> Century benefits delivery and services model consisting of a smart paperless, self-serve system (for example, electronic claims submissions) with automated decision support to improve accuracy and consistency of claims decisions.<sup>45</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The public was sometimes unaware and personally affected by the reduced FO hours.<sup>46</sup> Consequently, the public’s satisfaction with FO hours decreased. In addition, some FO managers reported that the reduced public hours generally improved workload processing as well as staff training and morale. However, some FO managers reported drawbacks from the reduced public hours, such as increased wait times, crowded lobbies, and limited appointment availability. SSA should continue communicating FO hours and other service methods, such as the National 800-Number and Website, to the public, other government agencies, and service organizations.

## AGENCY COMMENTS

SSA reviewed the draft report but did not provide any comments. See Appendix D.

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<sup>45</sup> VA, *Strategic Plan Refresh, FY 2011-2015*, pgs. 40 and 41.

<sup>46</sup> These results do not represent all individuals who do business at the FO. These results are a snapshot of individuals who were at the FO on a Wednesday after close and willing to talk to us.

# *APPENDICES*

## **Appendix A – THE SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION’S OTHER SERVICE DELIVERY OPTIONS**

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Most Social Security transactions do not require a visit to a field office (FO).<sup>1</sup> For example, anyone wishing to apply for benefits, sign up for direct deposit, or replace a Medicare card may do so by calling the Social Security Administration’s (SSA) National 800–Number at 1-800-772-1213 or logging onto its Website at [www.ssa.gov](http://www.ssa.gov).

### **SSA’s National 800–Number**

Individuals can call the National 800–Number to get recorded information and conduct certain actions 24 hours a day. Individuals who are unable to complete a transaction can speak to a Social Security representative between 7:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. See Table A–1 for SSA National 800–Number call data details.

**Table A–1: National 800—Number Call Data for Fiscal Years (FY) 2010 to 2013<sup>2</sup>**

	FY 2010	FY 2011	FY 2012	FY 2013
Average Daily Agency Calls Offered	225,249	216,005	239,094	255,337
Average Daily Agency Calls Handled	167,443	165,500	162,081	145,646
Average Staff on Duty	4,764	4,666	4,244	3,931

### **Internet**

Individuals can access the Internet to conduct transactions. According to SSA, Internet (electronic) transactions accounted for 18.9 percent of the FY 2012 workload volume, see Table A–2 for details.

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<sup>1</sup> As of April 2014, not all SSA transactions could be completed on the Internet. For example, individuals must complete Supplemental Security Income (SSI) applications at an FO. SSA plans to implement the SSI Internet application within the next 3 to 5 years. SSA, *Service Delivery Plan*, February 2013, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Data provided by SSA’s Office of Operations.

**Table A–2: eService Statistics Workload Comparison FY 2010 to 2012<sup>3</sup>**

	FY 2010 Electronic Transactions and Percent of Workload Volume	FY 2011 Electronic Transactions and Percent of Workload Volume	FY 2012 Electronic Transactions and Percent of Workload Volume
<b>Applications, Reports, and Post-Entitlement Events</b>			
Retirement Application	913,473	36.8%	999,203
Spouse Application	64,481	15.3%	68,202
Medicare-Only Application <sup>4</sup>	-	-	289,418
Disability Application	801,060	26.8%	1,000,935
Adult Disability Report	618,430	24.4%	815,817
Child Disability Report	106,927	20.6%	115,154
Appeal Disability Application	661,376	29.5%	872,695
Appeal Disability Report	556,739	37.7%	735,689
Medicare Drug Plan Cost	409,189	29.0%	338,179
Medicare Replacement Card	144,219	12.0%	165,184
Medicare Replacement Card Automated 800 Number	233,678	19.4%	198,244
Proof of Income Letter	618,745	3.0%	779,342
Proof of Income Letter Automated 800-Number	637,806	3.0%	628,075
Change of Address Password	109,801	2.3%	120,690
Change of Address Knowledge Based	279,802	5.8%	307,924
Change of Address Automated 800-Number	158,682	3.3%	151,330
Direct Deposit Password	180,423	4.1%	191,737
Direct Deposit Automated 800-Number	244,021	5.5%	249,228
Replacement 1099	127,783	5.7%	181,763
Replacement 1099 Automated 800-Number	95,913	4.3%	76,876
Representative Payee Accounting	441,680	8.4%	524,423
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7,404,228</b>	<b>14.0%</b>	<b>8,810,105</b>
			<b>16.2%</b>
			<b>9,961,881</b>
			<b>18.9%</b>

<sup>3</sup> As of April 2014, FY 2013 eService statistics were available; however, workload comparison data was not.

<sup>4</sup> The Medicare-Only application was effective February 2010. Therefore, a full year of transactions was unavailable.

## Appendix B – SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

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To accomplish our objective, we:

- Reviewed prior Office of the Inspector General (OIG) reports.
- Reviewed the Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, *Social Security Administration, Long-Term Strategy Needed to Address Key Management Challenges* (GAO-13-459), May 2013.
- Reviewed Social Security Administration (SSA) published reports.
- Contacted 1,172 field office (FO) managers, in December 2013, for feedback about SSA's reducing FO public hours and their effect on the public, staff, and workloads. For FO managers who did not respond to our initial request, we followed up in January 2014. Of 1,172 FO managers, we received responses from 1,028 (88 percent).<sup>1</sup>
- Observed 18 FOs (see Table B-1)—from August to December 2013—located in close proximity to OIG Offices of Audit at closing time on a Wednesday at noon and
  - ✓ documented the number of individuals who arrived after the FO closed;
  - ✓ observed individuals in the FO lobby during closure;
  - ✓ observed security guard activity; and
  - ✓ located FO signs displaying public hours.

**Table B-1: FOs Observed**

Region <sup>2</sup>	FO Number	City	State
Atlanta	600	Atlanta	Georgia
	622	Birmingham	Alabama
	030	Boston	Massachusetts
	075	Warwick	Rhode Island
Chicago	511	Chicago	Illinois
	485	Chicago	Illinois
	814	Dallas	Texas
	A76	McKinney	Texas

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<sup>1</sup> An effective response rate for questionnaires ranges between 75 to 95 percent. GAO, *Developing and Using Questionnaires* (GAO-PEMD-10.1.7), October 1, 1993, p. 203.

<sup>2</sup> SSA has 10 Regions. We observed FOs in all SSA Regions except Seattle, as the Office of Audit does not have an office there.

<b>Region<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>FO Number</b>	<b>City</b>	<b>State</b>
<b>Denver</b>	882	Denver	Colorado
	093	Lakewood	Colorado
<b>Kansas City</b>	098	Kansas City	Missouri
	772	Kansas City	Kansas
<b>New York</b>	144	Melville	New York
	109	New York	New York
<b>Philadelphia</b>	195	Columbia	Maryland
	283	Glen Burnie	Maryland
<b>San Francisco</b>	976	Berkeley	California
	383	Richmond	California

- Spoke with 79 individuals who arrived after the FO closed—while observing the 18 FOs.
- Provided SSA with information obtained from FO managers and the 79 individuals we spoke with—after we omitted any items that would identify a specific individual or FO—so decisionmakers could use the information to develop a long-term, service delivery strategy.
- Requested from SSA
  - ✓ analysis that the Agency conducted when deciding to reduce FO public hours,
  - ✓ future plans for increasing or decreasing FO hours, and
  - ✓ overtime costs for Fiscal Years 2009 to 2013.
- Reviewed other government agency public hours and service options.

We conducted our review between August 2013 and April 2014 in Boston, Massachusetts, and at the FO locations in Table B–1. The entities audited were the Office of Public Service and Operations Support and the FOs under the Office of the Deputy Commissioner for Operations. 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 objectives. We believe the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

## Appendix C – CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

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While conducting our 18 field office (FO) observations, we spoke with 79 individuals about how often they visited the FO and the purpose of their visit that day. These results are a snapshot of individuals who were at a FO on a Wednesday after noon and willing to talk to us.

**Table C–1: FO Visits Per Year**

FO Visits Per Year	Number of Individuals	Percent of Individuals <sup>1</sup>
First Time Visiting FO	33	41.8%
1-5 Visits Per Year	41	51.9%
6-10 Visits Per Year	2	2.5%
11-15 Visits Per Year	1	1.3%
Over 15 Visits Per Year	1	1.3%
No Response	1	1.3%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table C–2: Purpose of FO Visit<sup>2</sup>**

FO Service Sought	Number of Individuals	Percent of Population
Social Security Card Transaction	32	40.5%
Other <sup>3</sup>	16	20.3%
Earnings Report	7	8.9%
Supplemental Security Income Filing	6	7.6%
Award Letter	5	6.3%
Disability Filing	4	5.1%
Medicare Transaction	4	5.1%
Widow Transaction	3	3.8%
Direct Deposit Transaction	2	2.5%
Representative Payee Information	2	2.5%
Name Change	2	2.5%
Address Change	1	1.3%
Retirement Filing	1	1.3%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>85</b>	

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<sup>1</sup> Because of rounding, Table C–1 totals 100.1 percent.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the 79 visitors we spoke with sought more than one service from the FO; therefore, the number of individuals totals 85. The percent of population is based on the 79 individuals we spoke with (not 85).

<sup>3</sup> Other includes conducting transactions for family members and questions about current benefit payments.

## **Appendix D– AGENCY COMMENTS**

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### **SOCIAL SECURITY**

#### **MEMORANDUM**

**Date:** July 11, 2014

**Refer To:** S1J-3

**To:** Patrick P. O’Carroll, Jr.  
Inspector General

**From:** Katherine Thornton /s/  
Deputy Chief of Staff

**Subject:** Office of the Inspector General Draft Report, “The Social Security Administration’s Reduction in Field Office Operating Hours” (A-01-14-14039) - INFORMATION

Thank you for the opportunity to review the draft report. We appreciate the effort you took in conducting this review and recognizing the challenges we face in balancing workloads, decreased staffing levels and budget, all while continuing to provide quality service to the public. We have no other comments.

Please let me know if we can be of further assistance. You may direct staff inquiries to

Gary S. Hatcher at (410) 965-0680.

## **Appendix E – MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS**

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Judith Oliveira, Director, Boston Audit Division

David Mazzola, Audit Manager

Katie Toli, Auditor

Additionally, Office of Audit staff nationwide conducted field office visits and public interviews.

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