

Informational Report

Customer Waiting Times in the
Social Security Administration's
Field Offices

OIG

Office of the Inspector General
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

MEMORANDUM

Date: December 5, 2016 **Refer To:**

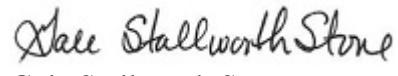
To: The Commissioner

From: Acting Inspector General

Subject: Customer Waiting Times in the Social Security Administration's Field Offices (A-04-17-50216)

The attached final report presents the results of the Office of Audit's review of customer wait times at the Social Security Administration's field offices.

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



Gale Stallworth Stone
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Attachment

Customer Waiting Times in the Social Security Administration's Field Offices

A-04-17-50216



December 2016

Office of Audit Report Summary

Background

We are issuing this report to provide information about customer wait times at the Social Security Administration's (SSA) field offices.

SSA administers its programs and services through a network of approximately 1,220 field offices in 10 regions that serve the public throughout the United States and its territories. Field offices are SSA's primary point of face-to-face contact with the public.

Major field office workloads include

1. processing original or replacement Social Security number applications;
2. taking applications and determining non-medical eligibility for Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income benefits;
3. conducting continuing non-medical eligibility reviews to ensure payment accuracy; and
4. performing other functions, such as updating beneficiary records and answering telephone calls.

Summary

While the total number of visitors to all SSA field offices steadily increased between Fiscal Years (FY) 2006 and 2010, the number of visitors began declining in FY 2011 and declined each year through FY 2015. The annual number of visitors to all SSA field offices decreased from 45.4 million in FY 2010 to 40.7 million in FY 2015.

Even as the number of visitors to SSA field offices has declined each year since FY 2010, customer wait times have increased in all 10 SSA regions. For all regions, the average wait time increased from 19 minutes in FY 2010 to 26 minutes in FY 2015.

The number of visitors to SSA field offices who waited longer than 1 hour for service significantly increased from FYs 2010 to 2015. In fact, for all regions, the number of field office visitors who waited longer than 1 hour for service increased from 2.3 million in FY 2010 to 4.5 million in FY 2015. Further, more than 11 percent of all visitors to SSA field offices waited longer than 1 hour for service in FY 2015. In contrast, only about 5 percent of visitors waited longer than 1 hour in FY 2010.

We plan to conduct a follow-up review that will examine factors that affect wait times and how SSA is managing field office wait times.

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ABBREVIATIONS

FY	Fiscal Year
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
SSA	Social Security Administration
VIPr	Visitor Intake Process Re-write

BACKGROUND

We are issuing this report to provide information about customer wait times at the Social Security Administration's (SSA) field offices. We plan to conduct a follow-up review that will examine factors that affect wait times and what SSA is doing to manage field office wait times.

SSA administers its programs and services through a network of approximately 1,220 field offices in 10 regions that serve the public throughout the United States and its territories. Field offices are SSA's primary point of face-to-face contact with the public.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2015, SSA field offices assisted 40.7 million visitors. Major field office workloads include

- processing original or replacement Social Security number applications;¹
- taking applications and determining non-medical eligibility for Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income benefits;
- conducting continuing non-medical eligibility reviews to ensure payment accuracy;² and
- performing other functions, such as updating beneficiary records and answering telephone calls.

In 2011, SSA began reducing field offices' operating hours. In August 2011, SSA began closing field offices nationwide 30 minutes earlier each day. In November 2012, SSA extended these early closures to 1 hour. In January 2013, SSA further reduced field office hours by closing every Wednesday at noon. However, in March 2015, SSA expanded the field office openings by 1 hour on each weekday but Wednesday. Field offices still close at noon on Wednesdays. As a result, as of the date of our review, field offices were open to the public 4 hours less per week than before SSA made these changes.

According to SSA, from FYs 2010 to 2015, the number of open field offices decreased slightly. In FY 2010, there were 1,238 field offices in operation. Because of closings and consolidations, that number declined 1.5 percent to 1,219 in FY 2015. The number of field office employees declined about 5 percent from 29,114 in FY 2010 to 27,667 in FY 2015.

SSA's Visitor Intake Process Re-write (VIPr) collects information about office visitors and appointments and provides management information for area, regional, and national reports. This information provides a picture of field office visitors and reception activities that help SSA analyze the effectiveness of its customer service. Visitors to SSA field offices must check in by

¹ SSA refers to the processing of these applications as its enumeration workload.

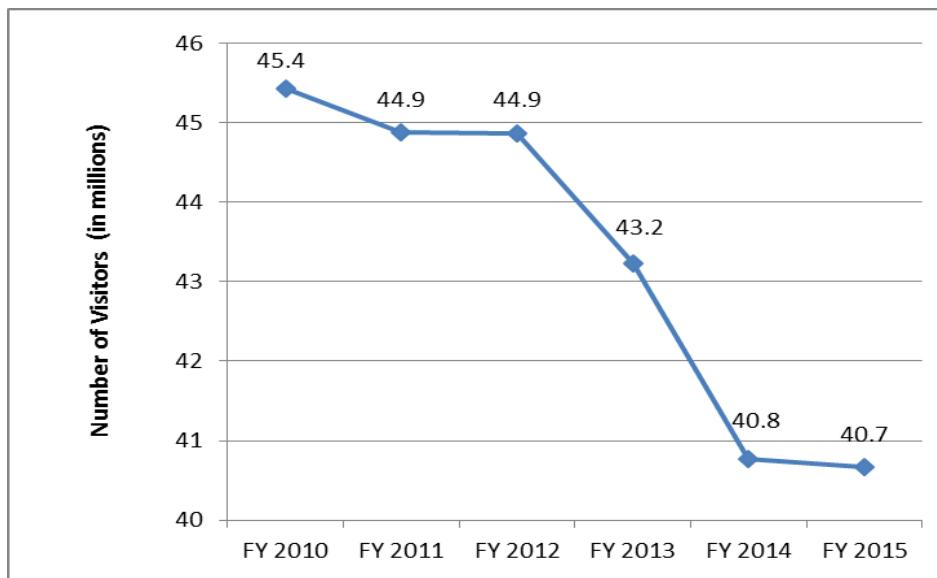
² SSA refers to these as continuing disability reviews and redetermination workloads. In FY 2015, SSA completed more than 799,000 full medical continuing disability reviews and approximately 2.3 million Supplemental Security Income redeterminations. SSA, *FY 2015 Agency Financial Report*, November 9, 2015, p. 201. Disability determination services (not the field offices) determine whether a person is disabled.

entering their information and reason for visiting the office in the VIPr self check-in kiosk. After check-in, VIPr provides the visitor a ticket number that SSA staff call when they are available to assist the visitor.

TRENDS IN THE NUMBER OF FIELD OFFICE VISITORS

While the total number of visitors to all SSA field offices steadily increased between FYs 2006 and 2010, the number of visitors began declining in FY 2011 and declined each year through FY 2015. The annual number of visitors to all SSA field offices decreased 10 percent from 45.4 million in FY 2010 to 40.7 million in FY 2015, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Trends in Total Visitors to Field Offices in All SSA Regions



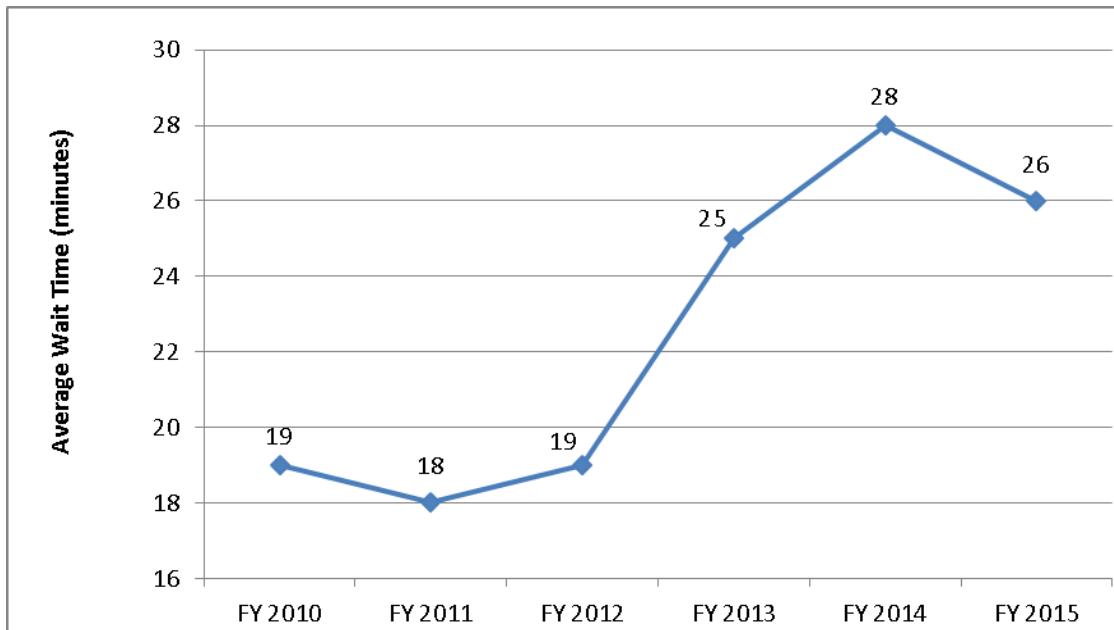
Source: SSA's Office of Operations.

AVERAGE WAIT TIMES FOR FIELD OFFICE VISITORS

Even as the number of visitors to SSA field offices has declined each year since FY 2010, customer wait times have increased in all 10 SSA regions. For all regions, the average wait time increased about 37 percent from 19 minutes in FY 2010 to 26 minutes in FY 2015, as shown in Figure 2.³

³ The wait times in this report are for all visitors to SSA's field offices. We did not distinguish between visitors with or without an appointment. Visitors can make an appointment with SSA, which should reduce their wait time. We will examine the differences in wait times for visitors with and without appointments in our next review on customer wait times.

Figure 2: Trends in Average Wait Times for Visitors to Field Offices in All SSA Regions



Source: SSA's Office of Operations.

As shown in Table 1, by percentage, the New York Region had the smallest increase, from a 25-minute average wait time in FY 2010 to 27 minutes in FY 2015—an 8-percent increase. The New York Region's average wait time for field office visitors was the highest of any region in FYS 2010 through 2012, the second highest in FYS 2013 and 2014, and third highest in FY 2015.

By percentage, the Kansas City Region had the largest increased wait time for visitors to SSA field offices—increasing 100 percent from an average wait time of 10 minutes in FY 2010 to 20 minutes in FY 2015. However, visitors to field offices in the Kansas City Region still waited less time for service than every other region for FYS 2010 through 2015.

Table 1 shows the average wait time (rounded to the nearest minute) for visitors to all field offices in each SSA region.

**Table 1: Average Wait Times for Visitors to Field Offices in Each SSA Region
(rounded to the nearest minute)**

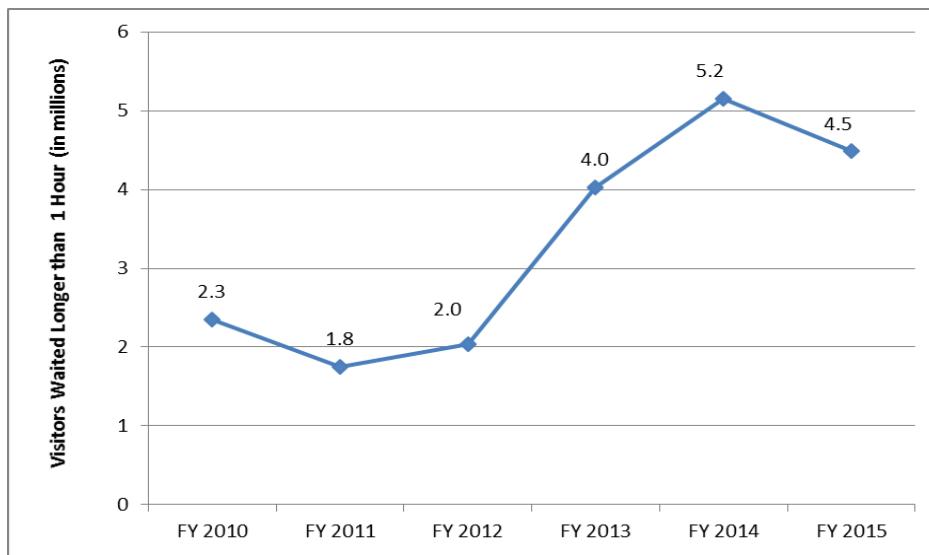
SSA Region	FY 2010	FY 2011	FY 2012	FY 2013	FY 2014	FY 2015	Percentage Increase from FY 2010 to FY 2015
Atlanta	20	18	20	25	27	26	30
Boston	18	16	18	21	23	23	28
Chicago	17	16	17	22	24	22	29
Dallas	20	19	19	25	30	30	50
Denver	18	16	18	24	26	27	50
Kansas City	10	10	10	15	18	20	100
New York	25	22	23	28	31	27	8
Philadelphia	18	16	16	22	26	24	33
San Francisco	20	19	21	30	35	30	50
Seattle	15	14	15	23	28	26	73
All Regions	19	18	19	25	28	26	37

Source: SSA's Office of Operations.

VISITORS WAITED LONGER THAN 1 HOUR FOR SERVICE

The number of SSA field office visitors who waited longer than 1 hour for service significantly increased from FYS 2010 to 2015. In fact, for all regions, the number of field office visitors who waited longer than 1 hour for service increased from 2.3 million in FY 2010 to 4.5 million in FY 2015—a 95-percent increase—as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Trends in Visitors to Field Offices in All SSA Regions Who Waited Longer than 1 Hour for Service



Source: SSA's Office of Operations.

As shown in Table 2, by percentage, the New York Region had the smallest increase, from about 471,000 field office visitors who waited longer than 1 hour for service in FY 2010 to almost 534,000 in FY 2015—a 13-percent increase. In contrast, by percentage, the Kansas City Region had the largest increase from nearly 10,000 in FY 2010 to about 92,000 in FY 2015—an increase of over 800 percent. The San Francisco Region had over 1 million visitors who waited longer than 1 hour in FY 2015—nearly 600,000 more visitors than in FY 2010 (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Visitors to Field Offices Who Waited Longer than 1 Hour for Service
(rounded to the nearest 1,000)**

Region	FY 2010	FY 2011	FY 2012	FY 2013	FY 2014	FY 2015	Percentage Increase from FYs 2010 to 2015
Atlanta	503	402	471	838	1,018	957	90
Boston	80	63	78	112	135	133	66
Chicago	251	174	193	378	522	428	71
Dallas	364	267	245	528	755	733	101
Denver	51	30	42	103	119	120	135
Kansas City	10	8	10	38	69	92	820
New York	471	347	381	580	675	533	13
Philadelphia	154	122	122	259	342	312	103
San Francisco	432	322	473	1095	1356	1,028	138
Seattle	30	17	21	95	166	152	407
All Regions	2,346	1,752	2,036	4,026	5,157	4,488	91

Source: SSA's Office of Operations.

In FY 2015, more than 11 percent of all visitors to SSA field offices waited longer than 1 hour for service. In contrast, only about 5 percent of visitors waited longer than 1 hour in FY 2010.

SUMMARY

Even as the number of visitors to SSA field offices had declined each year since FY 2010, customer wait times have increased in all 10 SSA regions. For all regions, the average wait time increased about 37 percent, from 19 minutes in FY 2010 to 26 minutes in FY 2015. In addition, the number of visitors to SSA field offices who waited longer than 1 hour for service increased 95 percent from 2.3 million in FY 2010 to 4.5 million in FY 2015. We plan to conduct a follow-up review that will examine factors that affect wait times and how SSA is managing field office wait times.

Rona Lawson
Assistant Inspector General for Audit

APPENDIX

Appendix A – SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

To complete our review, we:

- Reviewed prior Office of the Inspector General reports.
- Reviewed applicable Social Security Administration (SSA) policies, procedures, and operating instructions.
- Obtained and analyzed data on customer wait times at SSA field offices for Fiscal Years (FY) 2010 through 2015, including
 - ✓ the total number of visitors to all field offices in each SSA region;
 - ✓ the average wait time for all field office visitors in each SSA region; and
 - ✓ the number of field office visitors in each SSA region who waited longer than 1 hour for service.
- Obtained and analyzed data on the number of open SSA field offices and staffing levels at those field offices for FYs 2010 through 2015.

We conducted our review in Atlanta, Georgia, from June to September 2016. We conducted our review in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation*.

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By conducting independent and objective audits, evaluations, and investigations, the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) inspires public confidence in the integrity and security of the Social Security Administration's (SSA) programs and operations and protects them against fraud, waste, and abuse. We provide timely, useful, and reliable information and advice to Administration officials, Congress, and the public.

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