

Congressional Response Report

The Social Security Administration's
Telephone Services

OIG

Office of the Inspector General
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

May 15, 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 telephone services. 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 is issuing a separate report related to field office customer wait times.

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 Telephone Services

A-05-20-50899



May 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) telephone services.

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 telephone services. We are issuing a separate report related to SSA's field office customer wait times.

We analyzed performance metrics and customer service information for SSA's national 800-number and field office telephone services for Fiscal Years (FY) 2010 through 2019. In addition, we obtained information from SSA on factors that affect telephone customer service and SSA's strategies to improve them.

Findings

Between FYs 2010 and 2019, SSA's national 800-number experienced a 6-percent increase in calls. In addition,

- calls to the national 800-number resulted in more busy messages and hang-ups without the caller receiving service,
- the number of calls employees answered decreased,
- callers waited longer for service,
- more callers had their issues resolved on the first call, and
- teleservice center staff levels declined by 12 percent.

While SSA did not fare as well compared to government and private sector benchmarks, caller satisfaction was above the Federal average. To improve callers' experience and satisfaction, SSA plans to combine all its telephone service offerings into one platform to route calls to the best source quickly. In addition, SSA is implementing other improvements to its call center process and is hiring additional employees to answer telephone calls. However, effective March 31, 2020, in response to the recent coronavirus disease 2019 outbreak, SSA temporarily changed its telephone services, including modified hours for its national 800-number.

In response to our draft report, SSA stated its FY 2020 plan includes a priority goal to improve wait times for service on the national 800-number through targeted hiring, reassessing training methods, and improved technology. SSA also stated that, through the first quarter of FY 2020, it hired and initially trained approximately 460 new hires to support the national 800-number operations and will continue efforts to replace staffing losses and hire additional employees.

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ABBREVIATIONS

COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
FY	Fiscal Year
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
PC	Processing Center
SSA	Social Security Administration
TSC	Teleservice Center

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) telephone services.

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 telephone services. We are issuing a separate report related to SSA's field office customer wait times.¹ See Appendix A for the request.

SSA's telephone services consist of a national 800-number and a network of 1,193 field offices.² SSA's 26 teleservice centers (TSC) are responsible for answering calls to the national 800-number. At the end of Fiscal Year (FY) 2019, TSCs had 4,194 employees. These employees are available from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. local time, excluding weekends and Federal holidays.³ SSA's field offices act as the primary point of face-to-face contact with the public.⁴ Business hours for field offices varied by office throughout the review period, but they were generally open between 9:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., excluding weekends and Federal holidays.⁵ Of the 1,193 field offices, 715 provide their local telephone numbers in public directories. According to SSA, the remaining 478 provide only the national 800-number where calls are answered by TSCs.⁶

During evenings, weekends, and holidays, callers to the national 800-number can use automated services. During business hours, callers can speak to an SSA employee or use automated services. If calls requesting to speak to an employee exceed call capacity, SSA provides a recording that informs callers the system is filled to capacity and asks them to call back later. If there is call capacity, a recording provides the caller with the expected wait time and an option to

¹ SSA, OIG, *The Social Security Administration's Field Office Customer Service*, A-08-20-50898 (in progress as of May 2020).

² SSA has 1,227 offices in the field, but 35 are resident stations that provide limited services without telephone assistance. SSA, *Data for Field Office & Resident Station Information for Application Developers*, ssa.gov (last visited April 6, 2020).

³ This includes all time zones within the continental United States.

⁴ SSA, *Data for Field Office & Resident Station Information for Application Developers*, ssa.gov (last visited April 6, 2020).

⁵ SSA, *Using Our Automated Telephone Services*, ssa.gov (last visited March 31, 2020).

⁶ The *Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1990* requires that SSA maintain telephone access to local offices at the level of access SSA had available as of September 30, 1989. (Pub. L. No. 101-508, § 5110, 104 Stat. 1388 [1990]). As a result, all local offices that listed only a local telephone number on September 30, 1989 would list both a local telephone number and the national 800-number. The remaining offices would list only the national 800-number.

receive a call back.⁷ According to SSA, its automated system generates the call back and connects the caller to an SSA employee when the caller answers. Callers who do not elect a call back enter a queue and hear music until an employee answers the call. See Appendix C for more information on this process.

We analyzed performance metrics and customer service information for SSA's national 800-number and field office telephone services for FYs 2010 through 2019. In addition, we obtained information from SSA on factors that affect telephone customer service and SSA's strategies to improve them. See Appendix B for additional information on our scope and methodology.

RESULTS OF REVIEW

Between FYs 2010 and 2019, SSA's national 800-number experienced a 6-percent increase in calls. In addition,

- calls to the national 800-number resulted in more busy messages and hang-ups without the caller receiving service,
- the number of calls answered by employees decreased,
- callers waited longer for service,
- more callers resolved their issues on the first call, and
- TSC staff levels declined by 12 percent.

While SSA did not fare as well compared to government and private sector benchmarks, caller satisfaction was above the Federal average. To improve callers' experience and satisfaction, SSA plans to combine all its telephone service offerings into one platform to route calls to the best source quickly. In addition, SSA is implementing other improvements to its call center process and hiring additional employees to answer telephone calls. However, because of the recent coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19),⁸ SSA temporarily closed field offices to the public effective March 17, 2020 and is sharing field office general telephone numbers with the public so employees can provide telephone service at the local level.⁹ SSA also temporarily changed the hours for its national 800-number effective March 31, 2020.¹⁰

⁷ SSA offers call-back service between 8:00 a.m. and 8:30 p.m. Eastern Standard Time Monday through Friday.

⁸ 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 7, 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 7, 2020).

⁹ SSA, Commissioner, *COVID-19 Update* (Email March 16, 2020).

¹⁰ SSA, *Press Release, Social Security Benefits Will be Paid On Time and Other Updates Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic* (March 30, 2020).

Telephone Service and Customer Wait Times

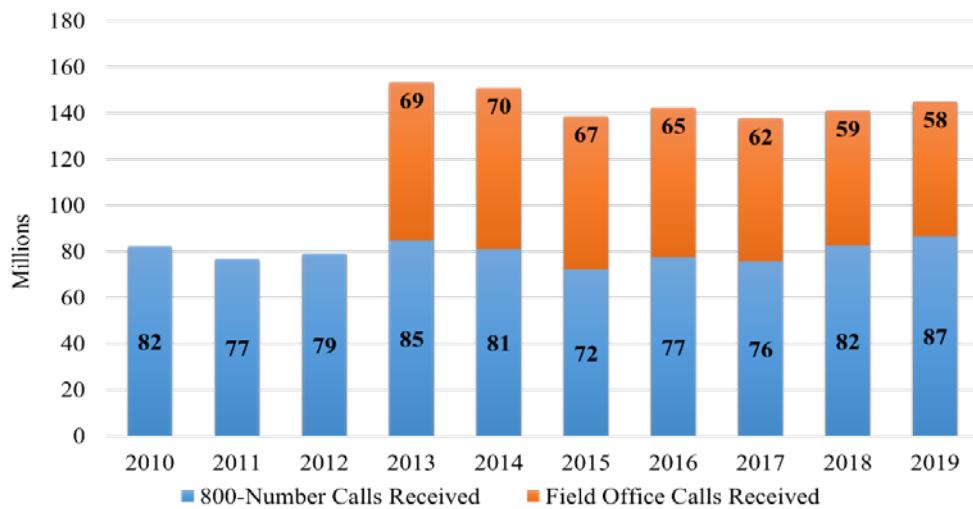
Between FYs 2010 and 2019, for each year:

How many calls were made to SSA's national 800-number; how many were made, in aggregate, to field offices?

The number of calls made to SSA's national 800-number increased from approximately 82 million in FY 2010 to almost 87 million in FY 2019 (see Figure 1 and Appendix D, Table D-1). Calls spiked in FYs 2013 and 2014. According to SSA, this was due to a change in telephone service provider and the lowest staffing levels in the 10-year period. SSA asserted the change in telephone service provider caused disruptions at a time when fewer employees were available to take calls. Both of these issues caused callers to hang up when they did not receive service and call back later.¹¹ SSA tracked each call and concluded that these repeat callers contributed to the spike in calls for FYs 2013 and 2014. SSA experienced an increase in calls to the national 800-number in FY 2019 because of inquiries from the public related to scams where fraudsters impersonate SSA employees. Specifically, in FY 2019, SSA reported its national 800-number handled over 850,000 calls related to imposter scams.

In FY 2013, SSA began using a uniform telephone system for field offices. Before FY 2013, each field office had an independent telephone system, and SSA stated it did not track calls to all field offices. Since FY 2013, calls to field offices generally declined through FY 2019.

**Figure 1: Calls Made to the National 800-number and Field Offices
FYs 2010 Through 2019**



Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

Note: According to SSA, field office data for FYs 2010 through 2012 were unavailable.

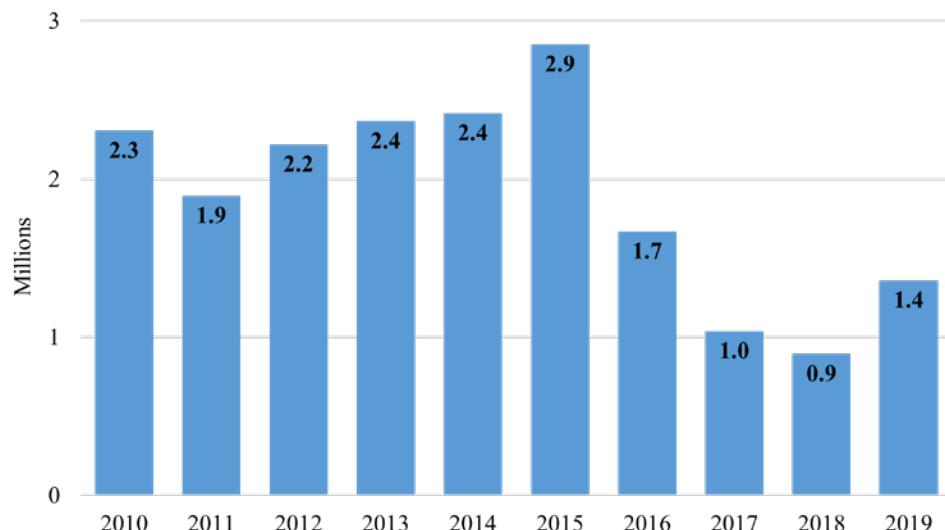
¹¹ See Figure 3 and Figure 5 later in the report for busy rates and hang-ups during FYs 2013 and 2014.

For 1-800-service and local field office telephone services, separately:

How many calls were routed to Program Service Centers?

When the call volume at SSA's national 800-number is high, TSCs receive assistance from six regional SSA program service centers and its Office of Disability Operations, collectively referred to as processing centers (PC).¹² Each year, from FYs 2010 to 2019, PC employees answered between 900,000 and 2.9 million calls to the national 800-number (see Figure 2 and Appendix D, Table D-2). PC support for the national 800-number began declining in FY 2016. In FY 2018, SSA suspended PC support for the national 800-number for part of the year, which enabled PC employees to dedicate time to pending PC workloads. Calls are not directly routed from field offices to PCs. According to SSA, occasionally, during natural disasters for example, calls to local field offices are routed to the national 800-number and, as such, can be answered by PC employees.

**Figure 2: Calls Answered by PCs
FYs 2010 Through 2019**



Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

Note: PCs did not support the national 800-number during the third quarter of FY 2018.

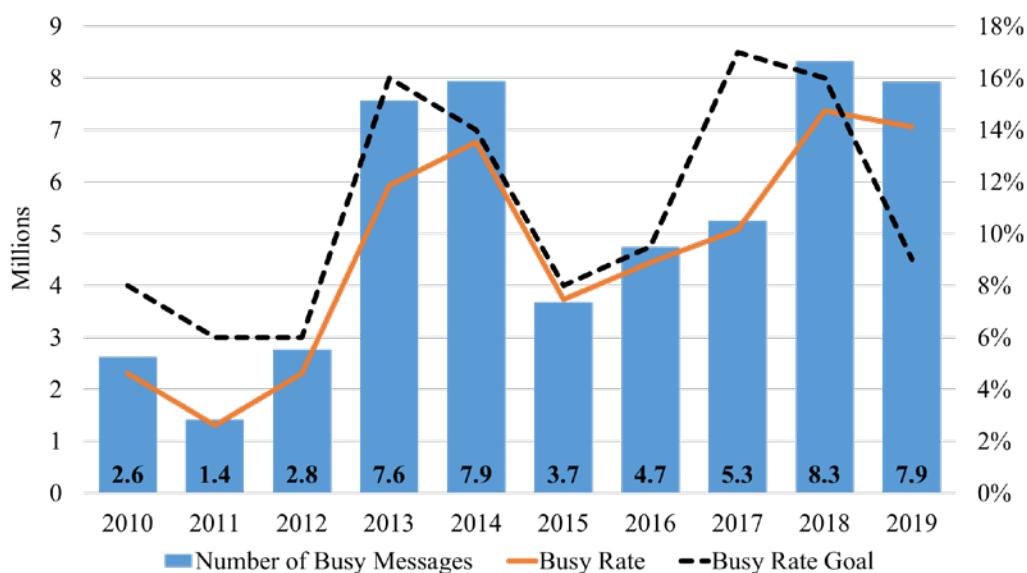
¹² Program service centers' main responsibilities are to issue payments, update beneficiary information, and resolve complex issues. The Office of Disability Operations' main responsibility is to process disability claims.

How many calls got a busy signal?

The number of calls that received busy messages fluctuated in FYs 2010 through 2019. For example, the number of calls that received a busy message increased almost 3-fold, from approximately 2.8 million in FY 2012 to almost 7.6 million in FY 2013 when SSA changed its telephone service provider (see Figure 3 and Appendix D, Table D-3). In FY 2015, the number of calls that received a busy message decreased by more than half, to approximately 3.7 million. By FY 2019, almost 8 million calls received busy messages.

SSA establishes goals for the number of calls receiving busy messages as a percentage of calls routed to employees. Between FYs 2010 and 2019, the goal for calls that received a busy message varied between 6 and 17 percent (see Figure 3 and Appendix D, Table D-4). In FY 2012, SSA's goal was for less than 6 percent of calls to receive a busy message, but in FY 2013, when SSA transitioned to a different telephone service provider, the Agency raised the goal to 16 percent. SSA met its goals for FYs 2010 through 2018. In FY 2019, SSA did not meet the 9-percent busy-rate goal, when over 14 percent of calls routed to employees received a busy message. SSA attributed this to higher than forecasted calls related to scams where fraudsters impersonated SSA employees, high attrition rates at the TSCs, and newly hired staff not fully trained when the call increase occurred.

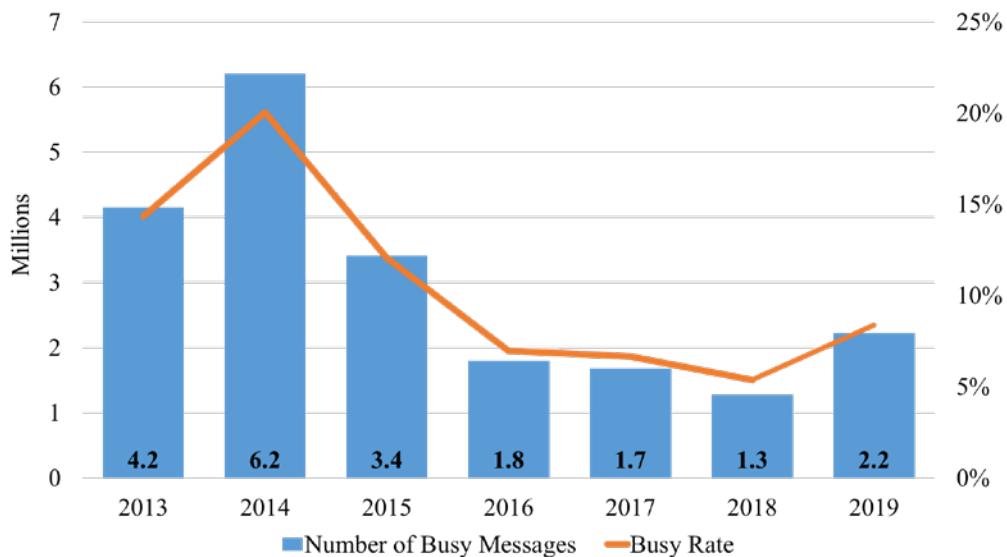
**Figure 3: Busy Rates for the National 800-number
FYs 2010 Through 2019**



Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

The number of calls to field offices that received busy messages generally declined until FY 2019 (see Figure 4 and Appendix D, Table D-3 and Table D-4). This decline corresponded with overall decreases in calls to field offices. In addition, SSA stated it began offering more automated options for callers to field offices in FY 2016. SSA does not have a busy-rate goal for calls to field offices because it focuses its performance measures on the national 800-number, which SSA considers “. . . the primary [A]gency source providing telephone customer service.”

**Figure 4: Busy Rates for Field Office Calls
FYs 2013 Through 2019**



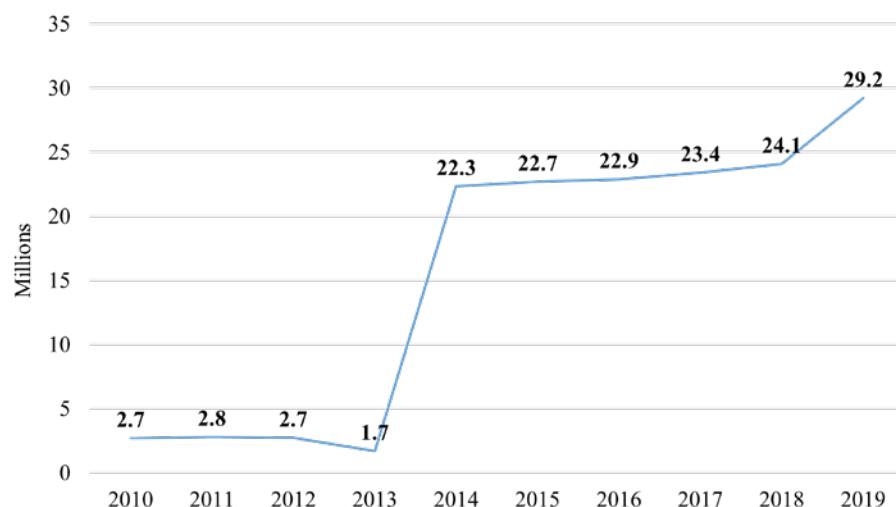
Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

Note: According to SSA, field office data for FYs 2010 through 2012 were not available.

How many calls were abandoned in menus?

Calls “abandoned in menus” occur when callers hang up while using automated services. In FYs 2010 to 2013, SSA’s telephone service provider did not collect detailed data on calls abandoned in menus for the national 800-number. During this period, SSA reported callers abandoned in menus between 1.7 and 2.8 million calls per year (see Figure 5 and Appendix D, Table D-5). After it changed to a different telephone service provider, SSA reported over 20 million calls per year abandoned in menus. The number of calls abandoned in menus increased 21 percent in FY 2019. This occurred after SSA began routing callers who selected automated services from field offices to the national 800-number’s automated application. According to SSA, it did not collect data on the number of calls to field offices abandoned in menus.

**Figure 5: National 800-number Calls Abandoned in Menus
FYs 2010 Through 2019**



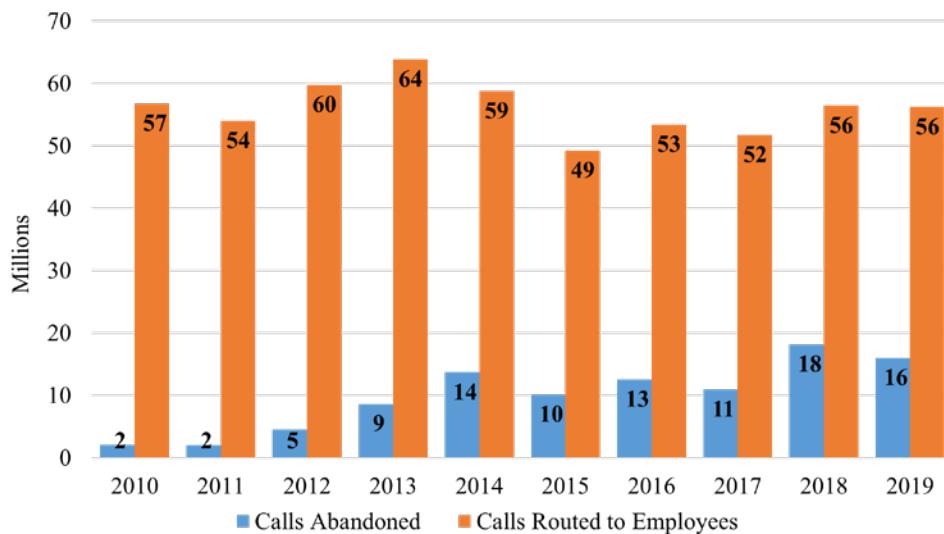
Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

Note: According to SSA, after FY 2013, its new telephone service provider for the national 800-number collected additional data about calls abandoned in menus. In FY 2019, SSA stated it began routing callers who selected automated services from field offices to the national 800-number’s automated application.

How many calls were abandoned in the queue?

SSA defines “calls abandoned in queues” as instances when a caller hangs up while waiting to speak with an employee. According to SSA, in FYs 2010 through 2013, its telephone service provider did not allow for detailed capturing of data on calls abandoned in queues. During that period, SSA reported approximately 2 to 9 million calls per year to the national 800-number that were abandoned in queues (see Figure 6 and Appendix D, Table D-6). After SSA changed to a new telephone service provider in FY 2013, SSA identified between approximately 10 and 18 million calls per year that were abandoned while in queue for an employee. The number of calls abandoned in queues spiked in FYs 2018 and 2019. For example, in FY 2018, approximately 56 million calls were routed to employees rather than automated services, and the callers did not request a call back. Of these, approximately 18 million (32 percent) calls were abandoned while in queue.

**Figure 6: National 800-number Calls Abandoned in Queues
FYs 2010 Through 2019**

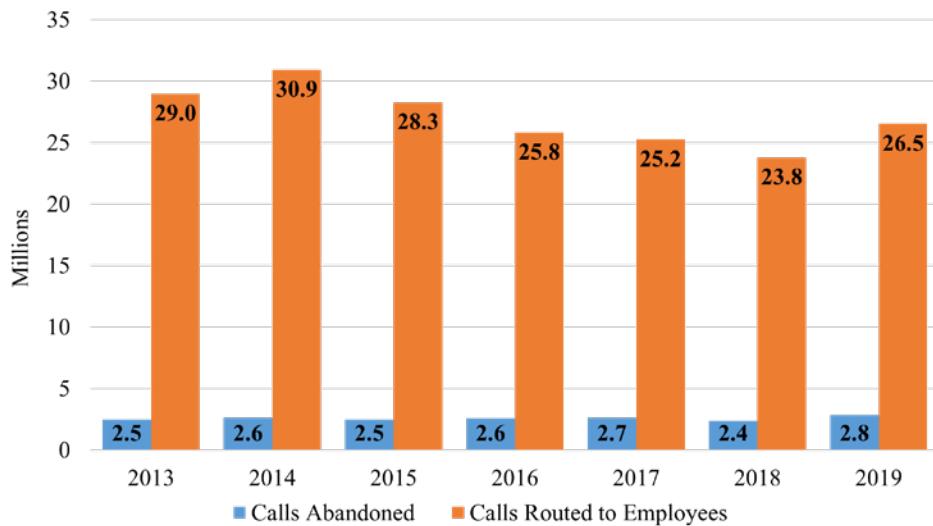


Source: SSA, Office of the Customer Service management information.

Note: According to SSA, in FY 2013, SSA changed to a telephone service provider that provided more detailed data about calls abandoned in queues.

Between FYs 2013 and 2019, callers abandoned approximately 2.4 to 2.8 million calls to field offices in queue each year (see Figure 7 and Appendix D, Table D–6). While the volume of calls abandoned remained relatively consistent, the number of calls routed to employees fluctuated. In FY 2019, 26.5 million calls were routed to an employee. Of these, 2.8 million (11 percent) were abandoned.

**Figure 7: Field Office Calls Abandoned in Queues
FYs 2013 Through 2019**



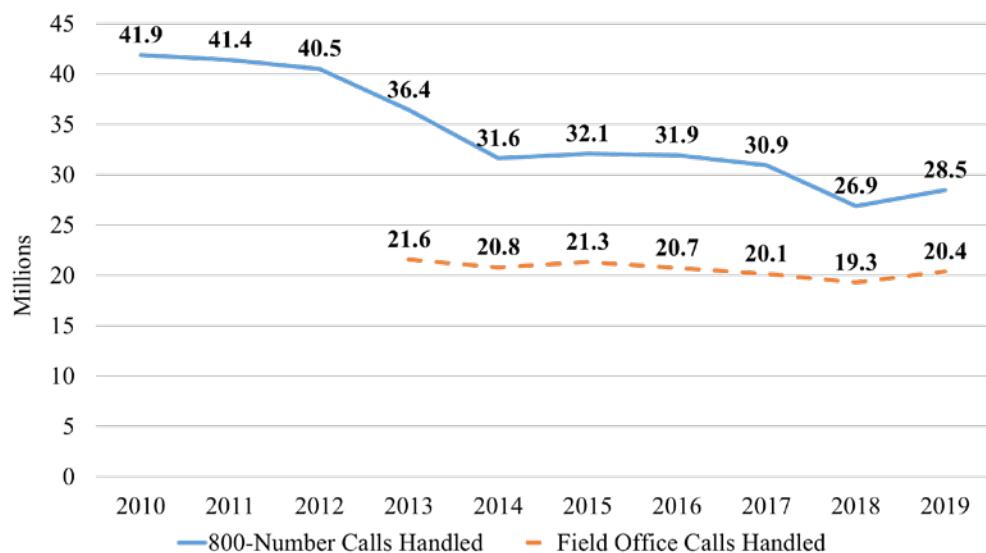
Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

Note: According to SSA, field office data for FYs 2010 through 2012 were not available.

How many calls were handled by agents?

According to SSA, calls “handled” are those where callers spoke to an employee, including callers who elected to receive a call back after initially calling the national 800-number. The number of calls employees handled at the national 800-number declined from 41.9 million in FY 2010 to 28.5 million in FY 2019 (see Figure 8 and Appendix D, Table D-7). The most significant decline occurred from FYs 2012 to 2014 during SSA’s transition to the new telephone service provider and the expansion of automated services. Between FYs 2013 and 2019, employees at field offices handled approximately 19.3 to 21.6 million calls per year.

**Figure 8: National 800-number and Field Office Calls Handled by Employees
FYs 2010 Through 2019**



Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

Note: According to SSA, field office data for FYs 2010 through 2012 were not available.

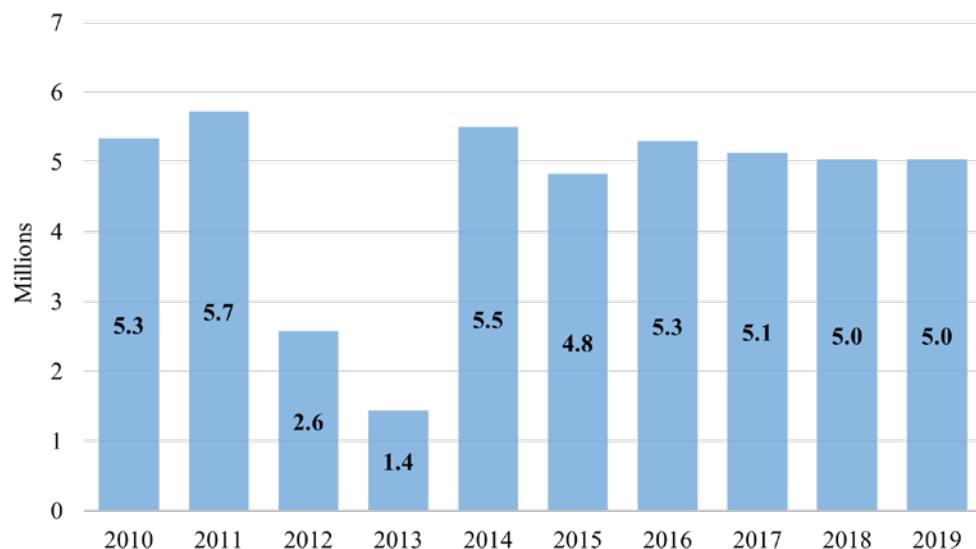
How many calls were handled by automated services?

SSA's automated services are the same whether the call is received during or after business hours. As of FY 2019, the automated services included

- obtaining verifications for benefits, such as retirement, disability, Supplemental Security Income, or Medicare;
- requesting replacement Medicare cards;
- checking claims status for individuals who filed for benefits;
- requesting certain forms and pamphlets; and
- finding field office address, telephone number, office hours, and directions.¹³

In most years, automated services handled approximately 5 million calls to the national 800-number (see Figure 9 and Appendix D, Table D-8). SSA saw declines in the use of automated services in years when it transitioned to the new telephone service provider. According to SSA, callers to field offices are not presented with the same automated services that are offered on the national 800-number.

**Figure 9: National 800-number Calls Handled by Automated Services
FYs 2010 Through 2019**



Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

¹³ SSA, *Using Our Automated Telephone Services*, ssa.gov (last visited March 31, 2020).

What was the average speed of answer?

Average speed of answer is the average amount of time calls wait in queue to be answered by an SSA employee. Wait time begins when the call is placed in queue and ends when an SSA employee answers the call. The average speed of answer was much higher for calls to the national 800-number compared to field offices. The average speed of answer for calls to the national 800-number fluctuated greatly during FYs 2010 through 2019. During FYs 2010 through 2012, employees answered calls in an average 3 to 5 minutes (see Table 1). Beginning in FY 2013, the average increased to over 10 minutes, peaking at almost 24 minutes in FY 2018. The average speed of answer at field offices remained at an average 2 to 3 minutes during FYs 2013 through 2019.

For the national 800-number, SSA establishes goals for average speed of calls answered by employees. Between FYs 2010 and 2019, the goal varied from 4.5 to 25 minutes based on anticipated changes in staffing and forecasted overall call volume. According to SSA, it did not meet the goal in FYs 2012 through 2014 because of an unforeseen decline in staffing or in FY 2019 because of the increase in calls received and new staff training needs. SSA stated it does not have an average speed of answer goal for field offices because it focuses telephone performance measures on the national 800-number.

Table 1: National 800-number and Field Office Average Speed of Calls Answered FYs 2010 Through 2019

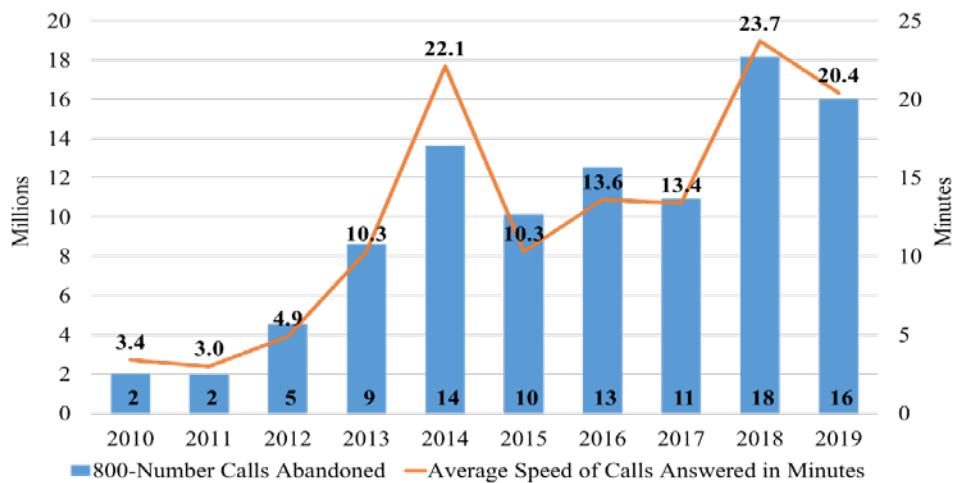
FY	National 800-number Average Speed of Answer (Minutes)	National 800-number Average Speed of Answer Goal (Minutes)	Field Office Average Speed of Answer (Minutes)
2010	3.4	4.5	Unavailable
2011	3.0	4.5	Unavailable
2012	4.9	4.8	Unavailable
2013	10.3	8.9	2.3
2014	22.1	17.0	2.7
2015	10.3	11.7	2.6
2016	13.6	15.8	2.9
2017	13.4	16.2	3.0
2018	23.7	25.0	2.9
2019	20.4	13.0	3.3

Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

Note: According to SSA, field office data for FYs 2010 through 2012 were not available. SSA stated it did not have a field office goal for average speed of answer.

When the average speed of answer exceeded 20 minutes, the national 800-number had the highest volume of calls abandoned in queues. For instance, in FY 2014, callers abandoned over 13.6 million calls to the national 800-number in the queue when there were wait times of longer than 22 minutes (see Figure 10 and Appendix D, Table D-6). There was not a similar correlation between average speed of answer and abandoned calls to field offices.

Figure 10: National 800-number Calls Abandoned in Queues and Average Speed of Call Answered FYs 2010 Through 2019



Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

What percent of customers were able to resolve their issue on the first call, with no follow-up required?

According to SSA, in FY 2015, it began monitoring first-call resolution through its national 800-number post-call surveys. The percent of callers whose issues were resolved during a first call to the national 800-number increased from 75 percent in FY 2015 to 80 percent in FY 2019 (see Table 2). SSA stated it does not obtain this information for calls to field offices because it focuses telephone performance measures on the national 800-number.

Table 2: First Call Resolution FYs 2015 Through 2019

FY	First Call Resolution
2015	75%
2016	68%
2017	70%
2018	69%
2019	80%

Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

How does SSA's performance on these metrics compare to typical government and industry benchmarks?

According to a FY 2017 study, SSA's national 800-number did not do as well as other agencies with first call resolution, average speed of answer, and percent of calls abandoned (see Table 3).¹⁴ For example, SSA resolved 70 percent of callers' issues during the first call; the Federal average was 83 percent. This study combined information from call centers at Federal agencies including the Departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and Labor, to determine Federal averages in a number of customer service areas. According to SSA, differences in the functions and services at each Federal agency can affect various performance metrics.

Table 3: Agency Comparison with Government Average

Effectiveness Metric	SSA FY 2017 ¹⁵	Government Average FY 2017 ¹⁶
First Call Resolution	70%	83%
Average Speed of Answer	13.4 minutes	34 seconds
Percent of Calls Abandoned	21%	5%

¹⁴ Bruce Belfiore & John Chatterly, *Benchmark Portal: Contact Center Industry Benchmark Report* (September 2017).

¹⁵ SSA, Office of Customer Service management information. The values are based on national 800-number first call resolution (see Table 2), average speed of answer (Table 1), and calls abandoned in queues (see Figure 6).

¹⁶ Bruce Belfiore & John Chatterly, *Benchmark Portal: Contact Center Industry Benchmark Report*, Chapter 5, p. 28 (September 2017).

SSA uses the annual *Government Contact Center Satisfaction Index* to compare customer satisfaction and other metrics across Federal, State, and local government telephone service centers. In the 2019 index, SSA's national 800-number received a caller satisfaction score of 65, compared to the government average of 63 (see Table 4). Of the four Federal agencies measured, only the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services had higher satisfaction than SSA. All agencies measured scored lower than the private sector average, which the study indicated is a historical trend.¹⁷

Table 4: 2019 Government Contact Center Satisfaction Index Scores by Agency

Agency	Satisfaction Score
Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services	66
SSA	65
Department of Education	63
Internal Revenue Service	60
State or Local Governments	63
Overall Government	63
Private Sector	68

Source: Claes Fornell International, *Government Contact Center Satisfaction Index* (2019).

We also researched private sector benchmarks. SSA's FY 2019 performance exceeded expectations for first-call resolution, which was to resolve 75 percent of callers' issues during the first call (see Table 5). SSA did not meet the private sector benchmarks for average speed of answer and calls abandoned.

Table 5: Agency Comparison with Private Sector Benchmarks

Effectiveness Metric	SSA, FY 2019 ¹⁸	Private Sector Benchmarks ¹⁹
First Call Resolution	80%	75%
Average Speed of Answer	20.4 minutes	28 seconds
Percent of Calls Abandoned	29%	12%

¹⁷ All information in this paragraph provided by Claes Fornell International, *Government Contact Center Satisfaction Index* (2019).

¹⁸ SSA, Office of Customer Service management information. The values are based on national 800-number first call resolution (see Table 2), average speed of answer (Table 1), and calls abandoned in queues (see Figure 6).

¹⁹ CloudTalk, *5 Call Center Metrics for Successful Benchmarking*, <https://www.cloudtalk.io> (July 19, 2018); Solvvy, *The Top Customer Service Benchmarks Of 2018*, <https://solvvy.com> (February 8, 2018); and TalkDesk, *Call Center KPI Benchmarks by Industry*, <https://www.talkdesk.com> (January 26, 2016).

How could SSA better track and evaluate callers' experience and satisfaction?

SSA plans to better track and evaluate callers' experience and satisfaction through its Next Generation Telephone Project. SSA describes this is as an Agency-wide initiative that will combine the national 800-number, field office telephone system, and Headquarters telephone system "... into one cohesive platform that will allow calls to be routed to the best source quickly."

According to SSA, this project will expand its management information collection to include the use of speech analytics for all recorded calls, desktop analytics, and post-call surveys for callers who use automated services. Speech analytics tools analyze the speech of everyone on a call. The analysis provides data SSA can use to determine needs for training or changes in the business process. Speech analytics will also help SSA identify the reasons for calls to improve forecasting and planning. Desktop analytics is a screen-capturing tool that tracks the screens in SSA's systems that telephone service employees use while assisting callers. Finally, this project will expand the use of post-call surveys to include callers who use automated services. SSA anticipates this additional information will be available in FY 2021, pending a successful contract award. Since SSA has not implemented this project, we did not assess its effect on callers' experience and satisfaction.

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?

According to SSA, in FY 2019, its national 800-number handled over 850,000 calls related to imposter scams. Because of congressional interest, we are conducting a separate review related to imposter scams.²⁰ To address customer service challenges, such as imposter scam telephone calls, SSA planned to hire 1,000 TSC employees in FY 2020, in addition to replacing nearly 1,000 employees lost in FY 2019. Through FY 2019, SSA staffed TSCs with over 3,900 employees each year since FY 2010 (see Table 6). In responding to our draft report, SSA stated it hired approximately 460 new hires through the first quarter of FY 2020 to support the national 800-number, and will continue efforts to replace staffing losses and hire additional employees.²¹

Table 6: TSC Staffing

Fiscal Year	Number of Employees
2010	4,764
2011	4,666
2012	4,244
2013	3,931
2014	3,922
2015	4,297
2016	4,203
2017	4,034
2018	4,011
2019	4,194

Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

In FY 2019, SSA modified the new-hire training and call routing to allow trainees to answer calls earlier in the training process. This process allows new hires to take calls during peak call

²⁰ SSA, OIG, *The Social Security Administration's Response to Telephone Imposter Scams, A-02-20-50904* (in progress as of May 2020).

²¹ See Appendix E.

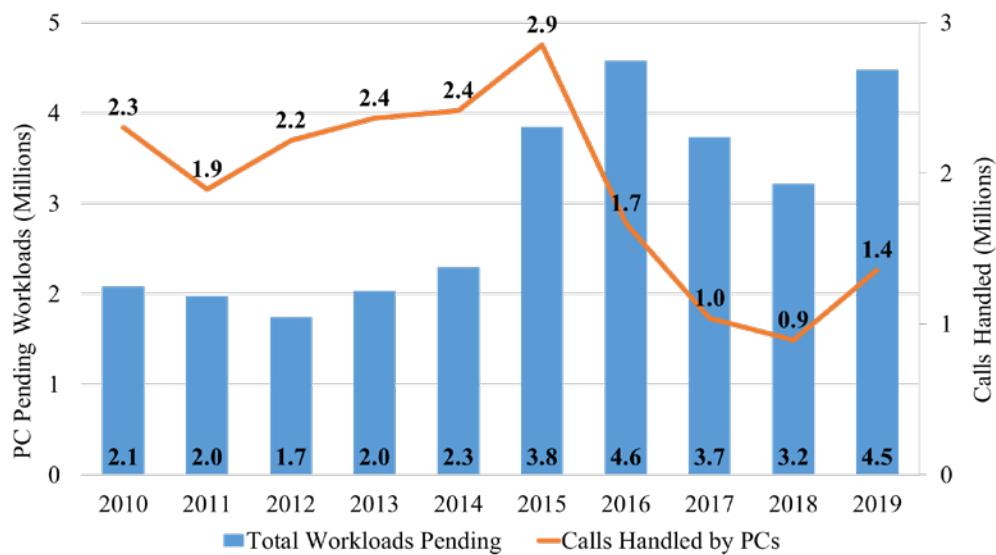
periods and complete training during non-peak periods. According to SSA, this should improve its ability to assist the public by having more employees available to take calls.

In addition, SSA implemented centralized, real-time monitoring in FY 2019 to alert call center managers of employees who are on extended calls and may need assistance. According to SSA, this helps reduce the average time an SSA employee spends on each call and increases the number of calls each employee can answer.

SSA also expanded use of centralized printing and mailing in FY 2019. According to SSA, TSC employees previously placed callers on hold to walk to a printer, pick up a form, and prepare the form for mailing. With centralized printing and mailing, TSC employees submit form requests online at their desks. This allows employees to shorten the calls and serve more callers.

Finally, SSA stated it shifted its focus from the PCs assisting the national 800-number to addressing growing workloads at PCs. During the 10-year period, PCs reduced the number of calls handled from 2.3 million in FY 2010 to 1.4 million in FY 2019 (see Figure 11 and Appendix D, Table D-2 and Table D-9). At the same time, pending PC workloads increased from approximately 2.1 million cases in FY 2010 to 4.5 million cases in FY 2019.

**Figure 11: PC Pending Workloads and National 800-number Calls Handled by PCs
FYs 2010 Through 2019**



Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

SSA intends for these actions to improve callers' experiences as well as ensure it completes other priority and critical workloads timely. However, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in SSA temporarily changing its telephone services. SSA temporarily closed its field offices to the public effective March 17, 2020 and shared field office general telephone numbers with the

public so employees can provide telephone service at the local level.²² SSA also temporarily changed the hours for its national 800-number to 8:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. local time effective March 31, 2020.²³

CONCLUSIONS

SSA's ability to serve callers to its national 800-number and field offices is tied to its telephone capabilities, staffing levels, and uncontrollable factors, such as fraudsters impersonating SSA employees. SSA is taking steps to address these challenges, such as modified processes to improve its ability to assist the public, additional hiring, and a potential new consolidated telephone system. However, COVID-19 resulted in SSA temporarily changing its telephone services, including providing field office general telephone numbers to the public and modifying the hours for its national 800-number.²⁴

In response to our draft report, SSA stated its FY 2020 plan includes a priority goal to improve the average speed of answer on the national 800-number through targeted hiring, reassessing training methods, and improved technology.²⁵



Rona Lawson
Assistant Inspector General for Audit

²² SSA, Commissioner, *COVID-19 Update* (Email March 16, 2020).

²³ SSA, *Press Release, Social Security Benefits Will be Paid On Time and Other Updates Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic* (March 30, 2020).

²⁴ See Footnotes 22 and 23.

²⁵ See Appendix E.

APPENDICES

Appendix A – CONGRESSIONAL REQUEST LETTER

JOHN B. LARSON
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CHAIRMAN

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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
Page Two

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

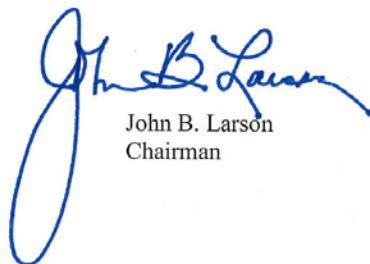
November 6, 2019

Page Three

- 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

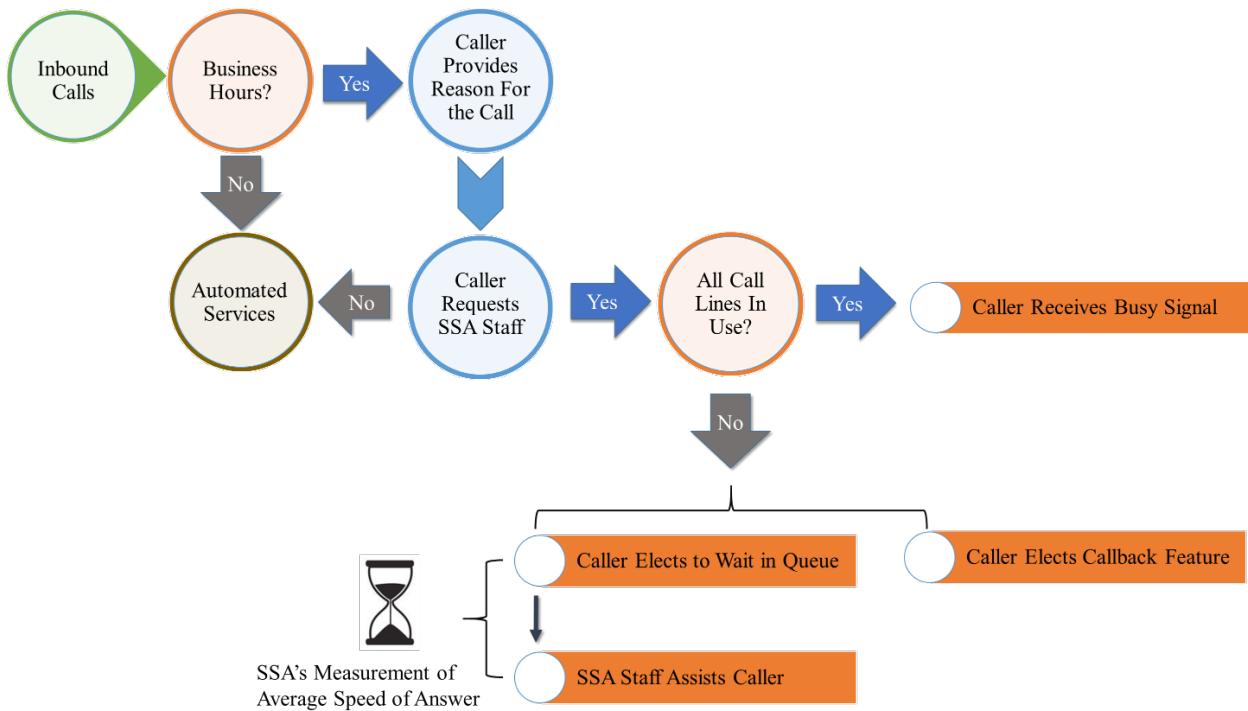
Appendix B – SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

To achieve our objective, we:

- Reviewed the Social Security Administration's (SSA) policies and procedures.
- Obtained and summarized SSA's Fiscal Year (FY) 2010 through 2019 performance metrics and customer service management information for teleservice center and field office telephone calls.
- Identified changes in staffing and workloads that occurred during FYs 2010 through 2019.
- Obtained and evaluated SSA reports on telephone customer service and SSA strategies to improve it.
- Determined SSA's performance compared to industry and Federal benchmarks.
- Identified factors, including recent increases in imposter scam calls, that affected SSA's telephone performance and customer service.

We conducted our review between November 2019 and April 2020 in Chicago, Illinois. The principal entity reviewed was SSA's 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 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 findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. 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 – NATIONAL 800-NUMBER CALL FLOWCHART



Appendix D – KEY DATA

**Table D–1: Calls Received by the Social Security Administration (SSA)
Fiscal Years (FY) 2010 Through 2019**

FY	National 800-number Calls	Field Office Calls	Total Calls
2010	82,158,331	Unavailable	Unavailable
2011	76,832,488	Unavailable	Unavailable
2012	79,005,502	Unavailable	Unavailable
2013	84,720,116	68,541,232	153,261,348
2014	81,037,852	69,906,474	150,944,326
2015	72,162,874	66,503,694	138,666,568
2016	77,398,759	64,923,950	142,322,709
2017	75,614,873	61,962,611	137,577,484
2018	82,471,547	58,558,680	141,030,227
2019	86,643,832	58,339,021	144,982,853

Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

Note: According to SSA, before FY 2013 each field office had an independent telephone system and did not track calls to all field offices.

**Table D–2: Calls Answered by Processing Centers (PC)
FYs 2010 Through 2019**

FY	PC Calls
2010	2,304,949
2011	1,893,512
2012	2,217,838
2013	2,364,908
2014	2,415,697
2015	2,851,219
2016	1,667,683
2017	1,037,748
2018	893,109*
2019	1,358,789

Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

Note: PCs did not support the national 800-number during the third quarter of FY 2018.

Table D–3: Number of Busy Messages for National 800-number and Field Office Calls FYs 2010 Through 2019

FY	National 800-number Calls	Field Office Calls
2010	2,617,370	Unavailable
2011	1,409,205	Unavailable
2012	2,758,605	Unavailable
2013	7,566,164	4,152,700
2014	7,943,167	6,196,449
2015	3,674,402	3,411,538
2016	4,743,738	1,800,209
2017	5,250,976	1,679,692
2018	8,316,351	1,278,617
2019	7,930,947	2,223,393

Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

Note: According to SSA, field office data for FYs 2010 through 2012 were not available.

Table D–4: National 800-number and Field Office Busy Rates and Goals FYs 2010 Through 2019

FY	National 800-number Busy Rate Goal	National 800-number Busy Rate	Field Office Busy Rate
2010	8.0%	4.6%	Unavailable
2011	6.0%	2.6%	Unavailable
2012	6.0%	4.6%	Unavailable
2013	16.0%	11.9%	14.3%
2014	14.0%	13.5%	20.0%
2015	8.0%	7.5%	12.1%
2016	9.5%	8.9%	7.0%
2017	17.0%	10.2%	6.7%
2018	16.0%	14.7%	5.4%
2019	9.0%	14.1%	8.4%

Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

Note: According to SSA, field office data for FYs 2010 through 2012 were not available.

**Table D–5: National 800-number Calls Abandoned in Menus
FYs 2010 Through 2019**

FY	Number of Calls
2010	2,690,610
2011	2,795,092
2012	2,726,080
2013	1,688,402
2014	22,333,962
2015	22,680,335
2016	22,874,037
2017	23,389,216
2018	24,073,015
2019	29,203,129

Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

**Table D–6: National 800-number and Field Office Calls Abandoned in Queues
FYs 2010 Through 2019**

FY	National 800-number Calls	Field Office Calls
2010	2,027,123	Unavailable
2011	1,965,619	Unavailable
2012	4,529,302	Unavailable
2013	8,633,161	2,500,603
2014	13,648,605	2,638,676
2015	10,131,616	2,506,650
2016	12,544,935	2,559,029
2017	10,920,693	2,658,133
2018	18,171,216	2,375,844
2019	16,013,241	2,826,449

Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

Note: According to SSA, field office data for FYs 2010 through 2012 were not available.

Table D–7: National 800-number and Field Office Calls Handled by Employees FYs 2010 Through 2019

Fiscal Year	National 800-number Calls	Field Office Calls
2010	41,860,834	Unavailable
2011	41,375,015	Unavailable
2012	40,520,364	Unavailable
2013	36,411,466	21,559,595
2014	31,611,486	20,807,071
2015	32,075,315	21,322,995
2016	31,930,606	20,714,949
2017	30,919,908	20,145,765
2018	26,876,099	19,272,735
2019	28,464,527	20,362,236

Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

Note: According to SSA, field office data for FYs 2010 through 2012 were not available.

Table D–8: National 800-number Calls Handled by Automated Services FYs 2010 Through 2019

FY	Number of Calls
2010	5,337,137
2011	5,721,161
2012	2,572,949
2013	1,432,078
2014	5,497,592
2015	4,825,326
2016	5,300,958
2017	5,134,080
2018	5,034,866
2019	5,031,988

Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

**Table D–9: PC Pending Workloads
FYs 2010 Through 2019**

FY	Total Workloads Pending
2010	2,081,252
2011	1,974,196
2012	1,743,549
2013	2,032,339
2014	2,293,808
2015	3,847,088
2016	4,576,798
2017	3,731,157
2018	3,216,917
2019	4,478,757

Source: SSA, Office of Customer Service management information.

Appendix E – AGENCY COMMENTS



SOCIAL SECURITY

MEMORANDUM

Date: May 1, 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 Telephone Services" (A-05-20-50899) -- INFORMATION

Thank you for the opportunity to review the draft report. Our National 800 Number (800 Number) handled over 33 million calls last fiscal year (FY). Through the 800 Number, the public conducts various transactions, and can choose to speak with a customer service representative or use our 24-hour automated services. We strive to provide timely and accurate service, but know that customers who call the 800 Number have experienced lengthy wait times in the past.

Commissioner Saul's top priority is to improve service to the public across all service delivery channels, including the 800 Number. Accordingly, he is driving an aggressive plan to emphasize and restore fundamental public service so that when the public calls our 800 Number, we answer timely. Our FY 2020 plan includes a priority goal to improve the average speed of answer (ASA) on the 800 Number, through targeted hiring, reassessing training methods, and improved technology. Through the first quarter of FY 2020, we have hired and initially trained approximately 460 new hires to support 800 Number operations, and we will continue our efforts to replace staffing losses and hire additional employees. We streamlined and enhanced training for these hires so they can handle routine calls earlier in their training, allowing experienced technicians to focus on complex calls, resulting in increased 800 Number productivity overall.

On the technology front, we enabled an Interactive Voice Response application to provide simplified authentication for claims status callers. Lastly, we are in the process of acquiring a new unified communications platform, which will allow us to efficiently route calls and answer them faster. This platform will also expand our management information, enhance speech analytics, and implement post-call surveys for customers using automated services. These enhancements will provide us greater flexibility to forecast and plan, assess training and business process needs, and evaluate customer satisfaction. We will also continue efforts to enhance self-service applications so callers do not have to wait to speak with an agent.

To measure our progress, Commissioner Saul set ambitious end-of-year ASA targets of 17 minutes for FY 2020 and 11 minutes for FY 2021. Our FY 2020 first quarter results indicated our efforts were working. Our first quarter ASA results were almost 20 minutes less than the ASA for the same quarter in FY 2019—16.3 minutes versus 36 minutes. In the second quarter, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted our telephone service delivery and we are working to resolve these disruptions as quickly as possible. We continue to work toward our targets to improve service to the public, while also protecting our employees during the pandemic.

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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