

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

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To assess (1) factors that affect customer wait times at the Social Security Administration's (SSA) field offices and (2) initiatives the Agency has taken to improve customer wait times.

Background

SSA administers its programs and operations 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 2016, SSA field offices served 43.5 million visitors.

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 visitors and reception activities that helps field offices analyze the effectiveness of their customer service. The Area Director and Regional Commissioner Offices monitor wait times at field offices in their areas and take measures to address issues, as appropriate, while the Office of the Deputy Commissioner for Operations receives monthly briefings on field office wait times.

Findings

In addition to the high volume of visitors, factors that affect field office wait times include complex workloads, staffing issues, and shortened public operating hours. To improve customer wait times at field offices, SSA uses such strategies as promoting eServices; providing self-help personal computers in field offices; using Workload Support Unit (WSU) capacity to assist the busiest field offices; using Video Service Delivery (VSD) and work sharing; approving overtime; and sharing best practices among field offices.

Although SSA monitors field office wait times at the national, regional, and field office levels and uses many strategies to manage field office workloads, it still faces challenges in improving its level of service and needs to continue being proactive in managing wait times. To assist in meeting customer needs, the Agency should consider using technology, such as VIPr, to monitor customer wait times at the national level in real-time. Doing so, would allow the Agency to expand its work-sharing program by transferring mobile workloads, based on Agency priorities, on a real-time basis. In addition, to ensure its customer service strategies are reducing wait times, SSA should periodically measure their effectiveness, where possible.

Recommendations

We recommended that SSA:

1. Determine the feasibility of using technology, at an enterprise-wide level, to identify high-stress offices and transfer eligible workloads, based on Agency priorities, on a real-time basis.
2. Periodically track the use and effectiveness of ongoing initiatives and tools used to monitor and reduce visitor wait times, where possible.

SSA disagreed with our recommendations.