

Office of the Inspector General

January 5, 1999

Kenneth S. Apfel  
Commissioner of Social Security

Acting Inspector General

Performance Measure Review: Evaluation of the Thirteenth Annual Social Security Customer Satisfaction Survey Data

Attached is a copy of our final report entitled, "Performance Measure Review: Evaluation of the Thirteenth Annual Social Security Customer Satisfaction Survey Data" (A-02-97-01004). The objective of this evaluation was to determine whether the Social Security Administration's performance data for its overall customer satisfaction, staff courtesy, and mail clarity were accurate and appropriately measured performance in these areas.

You may wish to comment on any further action taken or contemplated on our recommendations. If you choose to offer comments, please provide them within the next 60 days. If you wish to discuss the final report, please call me or have your staff contact Daniel R. Devlin, Acting Assistant Inspector General for Audit, at (410) 965-9700.

James G. Huse, Jr.

Attachment

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OFFICE OF  
THE INSPECTOR GENERAL

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SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

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PERFORMANCE MEASURE REVIEW:  
EVALUATION OF THE THIRTEENTH  
ANNUAL SOCIAL SECURITY CUSTOMER  
SATISFACTION SURVEY DATA

January 1999

A-02-97-01004

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EVALUATION  
REPORT

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# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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## **OBJECTIVE**

The objective of this evaluation was to determine whether the Social Security Administration's (SSA) performance measurement data for its overall customer satisfaction, staff courtesy, and mail clarity were accurate and appropriately measured performance in these areas.

## **BACKGROUND**

SSA's Annual Customer Satisfaction Survey has served as the Agency's gauge of how well it serves the public since 1984. The enactment of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), in August 1993, highlighted the importance of the data collected by the Annual Customer Satisfaction Survey. GPRA calls for each Federal agency to have and maintain strategic and performance plans with measurable performance goals and indicators and a means for comparing, verifying, and validating the data. Three of SSA's performance goals relate directly to data collected through the Customer Satisfaction Survey--overall customer satisfaction, staff courtesy, and clarity of SSA mail.

Beginning in Fiscal Year (FY) 1997, SSA's Office of Quality Assurance and Performance Assessment (OQA) took over the task of completing the survey from the Office of the Inspector General (OIG). OQA selected participants for its Customer Satisfaction Survey from a universe of beneficiaries who had a significant transaction on their Social Security file during a 4-day period in FY 1997. Two random samples of 1,500 customers were taken from a universe of approximately 870,000. OQA drew these two samples to test a change in the satisfaction scale, with one sample using "excellent" and the other using "very good" as the top rating. Questionnaires were mailed to the sample and OQA received a response rate of 78 percent.

The overall satisfaction of SSA customers is calculated by combining those who rated SSA service "good" or "very good." The satisfaction rating using this scale rose from 79 percent in FY 1996 to 85 percent in FY 1997, thus providing the first statistically significant improvement in overall satisfaction in 5 years.

After discussions with OQA personnel directly involved in the FY 1997 Customer Satisfaction Survey, we obtained and reviewed the data gathered by OQA to ascertain its validity and reliability.

## **RESULTS OF REVIEW**

- THE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SURVEY ACCURATELY MEASURED PERFORMANCE IN OVERALL CUSTOMER SATISFACTION, STAFF COURTESY, AND MAIL CLARITY FOR THE POPULATION THAT IT REACHED

*The Satisfaction Survey Does Not Reach All Customers*

- THE PROPORTION OF DISABLED CUSTOMERS IN THE FY 1997 SAMPLE IS LESS THAN IN PREVIOUS YEARS

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

We found OQA's methodology to be effective and that it accurately monitors performance for the three performance measures selected; however, the Customer Satisfaction Survey does not reach all of SSA's customers. Also, the proportion of disabled customers in the FY 1997 sample is less than in previous years which has potential impact on the satisfaction rating. We recommend that SSA:

- Identify and address the populations not currently reached by the Customer Satisfaction Survey.
- Track the effects of the proportion of disabled customers on the overall satisfaction rating and determine if disability status is a valid stratification factor if the Integrated Market Measurement Strategy (IMMS) implements market segmentation sampling.

## **AGENCY COMMENTS**

The Agency disagrees with our assessment that the newly designed IMMS is limited in its capacity to fully meet the GPRA's annual performance reporting requirement. SSA explains that while some of the data collected through the IMMS will be completed on a multiple year cycle, surveys of customers who visit field offices or call the 800 number will be completed throughout each FY. In response to our recommendation to address the populations not currently reached by the Customer Satisfaction Survey, SSA states that it will begin to expand the universe of customers surveyed with the Fifteenth Annual Survey. Additionally, the Agency believes that recently implemented changes in the sampling selection methodology will provide samples that are more representative of SSA's universe of customers, thereby precluding the potential for a disproportional sample.

## **OIG RESPONSE**

We believe customer satisfaction is a valuable outcome measure of the services SSA provides. We appreciate SSA's clarification of the cycle that will be used to measure

customers' experiences through the IMMS. An IMMS that is amenable to the GPRA reporting requirements will ensure that decision makers have timely information in order to monitor customer satisfaction with SSA services.

We are encouraged to know that SSA will modify the sampling methodology to ensure that responses provided by the customers surveyed are more representative of all of the Agency's customers. SSA's planned modification to select the sample throughout the year rather than the 4-day period typically used should minimize the potential for selecting unrepresentative proportions of disabled customers in the annual survey. Still, we believe it is important to monitor the effect this important subgroup of customers may have on overall satisfaction. Ensuring that the proportion of disabled customers and other important subgroups in the sample are similar to their proportion in the universe will help to produce a consistent and reliable yearly indicator of customer satisfaction.

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# **INTRODUCTION**

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## **OBJECTIVE**

The objective of this evaluation was to determine whether SSA's performance measurement data for its overall customer satisfaction, staff courtesy, and mail clarity were accurate and appropriately measured performance in these areas.

## **BACKGROUND**

SSA's Annual Customer Satisfaction Survey has served as the Agency's gauge of how well it serves the public since 1984. The Agency, as well as Congress, has looked to the findings from this survey for information regarding overall customer satisfaction, satisfaction by population type, satisfaction with the 800 number, length of waiting time in field offices, use of appointments, and staff courtesy. Beginning in FY 1997, SSA's Office of Program and Integrity Reviews, which has since been renamed the Office of Quality Assurance and Performance Assessment (OQA), conducted the survey for the first time. OIG had conducted the previous 10 customer satisfaction surveys.

## **SSA's Response to GPRA**

The enactment of GPRA, in August 1993, highlighted the importance of the data collected by the Annual Customer Satisfaction Survey. GPRA calls for each Federal agency to have and maintain a strategic plan and a performance plan. The strategic plan must contain a discussion of outcome-related goals and objectives, how the goals and objectives are to be achieved, and the program evaluations used to establish and revise the goals and objectives. Likewise, the performance plan must have: objective, quantifiable, and measurable performance goals and indicators using relevant outputs, service levels, and outcomes; and a means for comparing, verifying, and validating the data.

SSA published specific performance measures and goals in its performance plan for FY 1999. Both the strategic plan and the performance plan contain the five main goals set forth by the Agency:

1. To promote valued, strong, and responsive Social Security programs and conduct effective policy development, research, and program evaluation.
2. To deliver customer-responsive, world-class service.

3. To make SSA program management the best in business, with zero tolerance for fraud and abuse.
4. To be an employer that values and invests in each employee.
5. To strengthen public understanding of the Social Security programs.

Under "deliver customer-responsive, world-class service," SSA established FY 1998 performance goals for customer satisfaction. The first performance measure is the percent of the public rating SSA services as "very good" or "good," with a goal of 85 percent. The second measure is the percent of public "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the courtesy of SSA staff, with a goal of 90 percent. The third measure is the percent of public who are "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the clarity of SSA mail. The goal for this measure is 82 percent.

### **OQA's Methodology**

As in years past, participants in the Customer Satisfaction Survey were selected from a universe of Social Security beneficiaries who had a significant transaction recorded on the Master Beneficiary Record or Supplemental Security Record on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup> or November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1996. The sample included Retirement, Survivors and Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income customers who had:

1. applied for benefits;
2. received a decision on a claim or appeal request;
3. received notice that their payment status changed; and/or
4. reported a new address or other changes in personal information.

Two random samples of 1,500 customers were taken from a universe of approximately 870,000 customers for whom transactions were recorded for the dates above. OQA mailed questionnaires to the sample participants and made follow-up contacts with those who failed to respond. OQA achieved a response rate of 78 percent for each sample.

The FY 1997 Customer Satisfaction Survey utilized the same methodology as in prior years with one modification. In the past, only one sample was used. Two samples were used for OQA's survey in order to test a change in the satisfaction scale. One of the samples used an overall satisfaction scale with "very good" as the top rating. The other sample had an overall satisfaction scale with "excellent" as the top rating in an effort to use a "world-class" rating scale supporting the Agency's implementation of GPRA.

## OIG's Test of Satisfaction Scales

OIG previously administered a similar test of overall satisfaction scales used in the Customer Satisfaction Survey (SSA Client Satisfaction Survey Test of Satisfaction Scales [A-02-96-02204], issued on October 23, 1996). OIG tested the use of three different scales - the traditional five point scale with "very good" as the top box (very good, good, fair, poor, very poor), a four point scale with "excellent" as the top box (excellent, good, average, poor), and a five point scale with "excellent" as the top box (excellent, good, average, poor, very poor). The response rates ranged from 72 to 77 percent in the three samples of 300 SSA customers selected. The study found no statistically significant difference in top box satisfaction ratings among each of the three samples and the top box rating for the Twelfth Annual Customer Satisfaction Survey. (See results below.)

- |  |       |
|--|-------|
| • <i>Excellent (5 point scale)</i>             | 44.6% |
| • <i>Excellent (4 point scale)</i>             | 45.3% |
| • <i>Very Good (5 point scale)</i>             | 45.9% |
| • <i>Very Good (Customer Satisfaction XII)</i> | 46.0% |

Because there were no statistically significant differences, OIG determined that the scale could be changed without jeopardizing the integrity of the longitudinal analysis. OQA repeated the test using its second sample to ensure the comparability of longitudinal data in its FY 1997 Customer Satisfaction study.

## Findings from OQA's Customer Satisfaction Survey

The overall satisfaction of SSA customers is calculated by combining the ratings "good" or "very good." The overall satisfaction rating using this traditional scale rose from 79 percent in FY 1996 to 85 percent in FY 1997. According to OQA, this is the first statistically significant improvement in the overall service rating in the last 5 years. However, the overall satisfaction rating using the tested "excellent" scale in FY 1997, combining the ratings "excellent" and "good," was 79 percent. The OQA report stated that the public's reaction to the new scale indicates the semantic differences in two scales clearly affected the ratings. It further stated that the term "very good" does not seem to convey the same kind of high standard associated with world-class service that "excellent" does. OQA has not yet committed to the excellent scale.

When questioned about satisfaction with various aspects of field office service, respondents gave staff courtesy an 84 percent satisfaction rating. FY 1996's rating was 85 percent. Similarly, of those who reported receiving some type of mail from SSA, 82 percent were satisfied with the clarity of the written material they received. According to OQA's report, this represents a statistically significant improvement over FY 1996's rating of 78 percent.

## **SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY**

We conducted our evaluation in two phases. First, face-to-face and telephone discussions were held with OQA personnel responsible for the FY 1997 Customer Satisfaction Survey. The discussions were held to determine OQA's methodology, sampling techniques, and data analysis strategy.

Second, we reviewed the data gathered by OQA for the FY 1997 Customer Satisfaction Survey. This enabled us to compare OQA data with data from previous OIG studies and identify similarities and differences in sample demographics and response rates for groups.

Our review was conducted from September 1997 to March 1998. This evaluation was performed in accordance with the ***Quality Standards for Inspections*** issued by the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency.

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# **RESULTS OF REVIEW**

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## **THE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SURVEY ACCURATELY MEASURED PERFORMANCE IN OVERALL CUSTOMER SATISFACTION, STAFF COURTESY, AND MAIL CLARITY FOR THE POPULATION THAT IT REACHED**

Each percentage level of satisfaction reported by OQA in "The Thirteenth Annual SSA Customer Satisfaction Survey" was replicated and confirmed by OIG using statistical software. We obtained the FY 1997 samples drawn by OQA and used statistical software programs to recreate each statistic. We were able to accurately reproduce each percentage exactly as reported in the OQA study. These percentages included the three performance measures extrapolated directly from the annual survey--overall customer satisfaction, staff courtesy, and mail clarity. We also verified that there were statistically significant changes in the customer satisfaction and mail clarity ratings between FY 1996 and FY 1997 (see Appendix B).

### ***The Satisfaction Survey Does Not Reach All Customers***

While each number reported in the OQA survey is accurate, it should be noted that the survey is sent, and always has been sent, only to those selected customers who had a significant transaction posted to their automated case files during a 4-day period in FY 1997. Thus, the sample does not include those in the general public who just walk into a Social Security office or telephone the 800 number seeking general information. Moreover, it does not measure the satisfaction level of those recipients who apply for a new or replacement Social Security number card, which accounts for over 16 million transactions annually.

SSA already recognizes that some populations are missed and is proposing other ways to reach these populations. SSA hired the Pacific Consulting Group (PCG) to identify any weaknesses or gaps in its performance measurement and monitoring system. PCG suggested that SSA use a variety of methodologies to extract service delivery information. In response to this recommendation, SSA established the IMMS, which outlines various ideas for more encompassing data collection efforts through the use of differing methodologies and market segmentation. However, IMMS calls for some assessments to occur only every few years which would make it difficult to use the assessment data in annual GPRA reporting.

## **THE PROPORTION OF DISABLED CUSTOMERS IN FY 1997 SAMPLE IS LESS THAN IN PREVIOUS YEARS**

Although initial sampling is not stratified by disability status (disabled vs. nondisabled), a poststratified analysis by this category is used to detect differences in responses. Historically, the distribution of disabled vs. nondisabled has been consistent, with a little over half of those sampled being classified as disabled. However, when comparing samples as of FY 1993, there is an average 9 percent decrease in disabled beneficiaries represented in the FY 1997 sample (see Table 1). This decrease is not repeated in the FY 1998 sample, which reflects a more balanced distribution such as those found in samples prior to FY 1997.

**Table 1. Sample and Respondent Comparisons: 1993 - 1998<sup>1</sup>**

Year	Sample			Respondents		
	N	Disabled <sup>1</sup>	Nondisabled <sup>1</sup>	N	Disabled <sup>1</sup>	Nondisabled <sup>1</sup>
1993 (OIG)	1300	51.5%	48.6%	1038	48.3%	51.7%
1994 (OIG)	1300	53.1%	46.9%	1005	49.7%	50.3%
1995 (OIG)	1300	50.8%	49.2%	980	47.1%	52.9%
1996 (OIG)	1500	56.1%	43.9%	1132	53%	47%
1997 (OQA)	1500	44.2%	55.8%	1171	38.8%	61.2%
1998 (OQA) <sup>2</sup>	3000	58.9%	41.1%	n/a	n/a	n/a

<sup>1</sup> Numbers are rounded.

<sup>2</sup> OQA's FY 1998 Customer Satisfaction Survey had not been completed at the time of this report, but the sample had been drawn.

We are unsure of what caused the 1997 decrease, but its impact on overall satisfaction was minimal, even though historically disabled customers report being less satisfied than nondisabled (see Table 2).<sup>1</sup> We also mathematically projected what the overall satisfaction rate would have been if the proportion of FY 1997 disabled respondents mirrored the proportion of FY 1996 disabled respondents. There was a minimal drop, less than 2 percent, in overall satisfaction score (85.4 percent to 83.5 percent). Additionally, OQA tested for respondent bias and determined that nonrespondents would answer similarly as respondents. If so, an increased satisfaction rate would also have been reflected among the disabled nonrespondents.

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<sup>1</sup> We tested what percent of overall satisfaction was explained by survey year (1996 and 1997) and health status (disabled and nondisabled). See Appendix C.

**Table 2. Satisfaction with SSA's Customer Service by Disability Status<sup>1</sup>**

Year	Disabled	Nondisabled
1993 (OIG)	68%	86%
1994 (OIG)	68%	87%
1995 (OIG)	68%	89%
1996 (OIG)	71%	89%
1997 (OQA)	77%	91%

<sup>1</sup> Includes all response categories. Numbers are rounded.

To further determine disability status' impact on the overall satisfaction rate, it will be important to monitor the results of the FY 1998 survey. Given the higher proportion of disabled customers included in the sample, it will be interesting to note how the overall satisfaction rate differs (increases or decreases) from the FY 1997 survey that included fewer disabled customers.

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# **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

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We found OQA's methodology and sampling techniques valid and reliable. SSA accurately reported overall satisfaction, staff courtesy, and mail clarity for the populations reached. However, not all types of SSA customers are sampled. Although SSA's newly designed IMMS includes methods to sample a wider array of customers, we believe it is limited in its capacity to fully meet GPRA's annual performance reporting requirement, especially since some IMMS assessments will not be conducted on an annual basis.

Additionally, we noted a unique variation in the FY 1997 survey. The sample included a decreased proportion of disabled customers when compared to previous years. We are unsure of why this decrease occurred and the discrepancy has not been repeated in the already drawn FY 1998 survey sample. Since this underrepresentation has occurred only once, it is unclear how, if repeated, it would manifest itself over time.

In order to address these issues, we recommend that SSA:

1. Identify and address the populations not currently reached by the Customer Satisfaction Survey.
2. Track the effects of the proportion of disabled customers on the overall satisfaction rating and determine if disability status is a valid stratification factor if IMMS implements market segmentation sampling.

## **AGENCY COMMENTS**

The Agency disagrees with our conclusion that the newly designed IMMS is limited in its capacity to fully meet the GPRA's annual performance reporting requirement. SSA explains that while some of the data collected through the IMMS will be completed on a multiple year cycle, surveys of customers who visit field offices or call the 800 number will be completed throughout each FY. In response to our recommendation to address the populations not currently reached by the Customer Satisfaction Survey, SSA states that it will begin to expand the universe of customers surveyed with the Fifteenth Annual Survey. Additionally, the Agency believes that recently implemented changes in the sampling selection methodology will provide samples that are more representative of SSA's universe of customers, thereby precluding the potential for a disproportional sample. The full text of SSA's comments is provided in Appendix D.

## **OIG RESPONSE**

We believe customer satisfaction is a valuable outcome measure of the services SSA provides. We appreciate SSA's clarification of the cycle that will be used to measure customers' experiences through the IMMS. An IMMS that is amenable to the GPRA reporting requirements will ensure that decision makers have timely information in order to monitor customer satisfaction with SSA services.

We are encouraged to know that SSA will modify the sampling methodology to ensure that responses provided by the customers surveyed are more representative of all of the Agency's customers. SSA's planned modification to select the sample throughout the year rather than the 4-day period typically used should minimize the potential for selecting unrepresentative proportions of disabled customers in the annual survey. Still, we believe it is important to monitor the effect this important subgroup of customers may have on overall satisfaction. Ensuring that the proportion of disabled customers and other important subgroups in the sample are similar to their proportion in the universe will help to produce a consistent and reliable yearly indicator of customer satisfaction.

# **APPENDICES**

## **DEFINITIONS OF ACRONYMS**

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FY	Fiscal Year
GPRA	Government Performance and Results Act
IMMS	Integrated Market Measurement Strategy
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
OQA	Office of Quality Assurance and Performance Assessment
PCG	Pacific Consulting Group
SSA	Social Security Administration
IMMS	Integrated Market Measurement Strategy

## APPENDIX B

# TESTS FOR SIGNIFICANCE

We used *SPSS 8.0* nonparametric tests for two independent samples to test statistically significant differences between 1996 and 1997 responses for clarity of received written materials and for overall satisfaction. These tests are based on the Man-Whitney *U* and Wilcoxon *W*. Results for both areas are statistically significant (clarity at the .01 level and overall satisfaction at the .03 level, leading us to agree with the Office of Quality Assurance and Performance Assessment's finding of statistical difference between each year's responses [see Tables 1 – 4]).

**Table 1. Variables and Count for Clarity**

Year and Code	Count
1996* (0) Dissatisfied**	716
1996 (1) Satisfied	130
1997* (0) Dissatisfied**	104
1997 (1) Satisfied	779

\*1996 Sample (N=1132); 1997 Sample (N=1171)

\*Grouping Variable: YEAR

\*\*Dissatisfied collapsed "Very Dissatisfied or Dissatisfied" categories;  
Satisfied was created by collapsing "Very Satisfied or Satisfied"

**Table 2. Test Statistics for Clarity\***

	Clarity
Mann-Whitney <i>U</i>	360106.00
Wilcoxon <i>W</i>	718387.00
Z	-2.180
Asymp.Sig.(2-tailed)	.029

**Table 3. Variables and Count for Overall Satisfaction**

Year and Code	Count
1996* (0) Poor**	95
1996 (1) Good	866
1997* (0) Poor**	70
1997 (1) Good	973

\*1996 Sample (N=1132); 1997 Sample (N=1171)

\*Grouping Variable: YEAR

\*\*Poor collapsed "Very Poor or Poor" categories; Good collapsed  
"Very Good or Good"

**Table 4. Test Statistics for Overall Satisfaction\***

	Satisfaction
Mann-Whitney <i>U</i>	485254.00
Wilcoxon <i>W</i>	947495.00
Z	-2.582
Asymp.Sig.(2-tailed)	.010

# TEST OF EXPLAINED VARIANCE

We used *SPSS 8.0* General Factorial Analysis of Variance, based on a general linear model, to test what percent (explanation of variance) the factors of survey year and respondent's status (disabled/nondisabled) contributed to explaining overall satisfaction. Since year and status were nominal scale variables, we created dummy variables to insert into the regression equation.

As shown in Table 2, the  $R^2$  indicates that only 3.8 percent of the variance in overall satisfaction is explained by a respondent's status and survey year. Of the 3.8 percent, respondent's status accounts for 3.2 percent and year for .3 percent. These results lead us to conclude that being either disabled or nondisabled does not add much to explaining overall satisfaction.

**Table 1. Test Variables for Overall Satisfaction--  
Univariate Analysis of Variance**

Dummy Variables	N*
Year 96-97	
1997 (0)	1140
1996 (1)	1103
Status	
Disabled (0)	1029
Nondisabled (1)	1214

\*Those responding "Neither" to the overall satisfaction were not included in analysis

**Table 2. Test of Between-Subjects Effects\***

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	***Eta Squared
Corrected Model	41.318 <sup>a</sup>	3	13.773	29.556	**.000	.038
Intercept	3670.525	1	3670.525	7876.819	.000	.779
YEAR	2.999	1	2.99	6.436	**.011	.003
D-NSAT	34.586	1	34.586	74.221	**.000	.032
YEAR*D-NSAT	.109	1	.109	.235	.628	.000
Error	1043.353	2239	.466			
Total	4798.000	2243				
Corrected Total	1084.671	2242				

<sup>a</sup> $R^2 = .038$

\*Overall Satisfaction was the Dependent Variable; Year and Status were Fixed

\*\*Significant at p<.02

\*\*\*Eta Squared – measure of association used with nominal level independent variable

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**APPENDIX D**

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## **AGENCY COMMENTS**

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## **MAJOR REPORT CONTRIBUTORS**

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### **Office of the Inspector General**

E. Scott Patterson, Director, Management Audits and Technical Services

Timothy F. Nee, Deputy Director

Tracey K. Rennie, Evaluator-in-Charge

Alan Lang, Auditor

Carolyn Neuwirth, Program Specialist

For additional copies of this report, please contact the Office of the Inspector General's Public Affairs Specialist at (410) 966-9135. Refer to Common Identification Number A-02-97-01004.

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**APPENDIX F**

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## **SSA ORGANIZATIONAL CHART**

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