



SOCIAL SECURITY
Office of the Inspector General

MEMORANDUM

Date: March 30, 2001

Refer To:

To: Larry G. Massanari
Acting Commissioner
of Social Security

From Inspector General

Subject Review of the Social Security Administration's Organizational
Capacity to Monitor and Plan for Customer Service Initiatives (A-02-00-20020)

The attached final report presents the results of our audit. This audit was initiated in response to a request from the Chairman of the Senate Special Committee on Aging, to assess the effectiveness of the Market Measurement Program and identify any other efforts to improve customer service that should be implemented.

Please comment within 60 days from the date of this memorandum on corrective action taken or planned on each recommendation. If you wish to discuss the final report, please call me or have your staff contact Steven L. Schaeffer, Assistant Inspector General for Audit, at (410) 965-9700.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "James G. Huse, Jr.", written in black ink.

James G. Huse, Jr.

Attachment

**OFFICE OF
THE INSPECTOR GENERAL**

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

**REVIEW OF THE
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION'S
ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY TO
MONITOR AND PLAN FOR CUSTOMER
SERVICE INITIATIVES**

March 2001

A-02-00-20020

AUDIT REPORT



Mission

We improve SSA programs and operations and protect them against fraud, waste, and abuse by conducting independent and objective audits, evaluations, and investigations. We provide timely, useful, and reliable information and advice to Administration officials, the Congress, and the public.

Authority

The Inspector General Act created independent audit and investigative units, called the Office of Inspector General (OIG). The mission of the OIG, as spelled out in the Act, is to:

- Conduct and supervise independent and objective audits and investigations relating to agency programs and operations.**
- Promote economy, effectiveness, and efficiency within the agency.**
- Prevent and detect fraud, waste, and abuse in agency programs and operations.**
- Review and make recommendations regarding existing and proposed legislation and regulations relating to agency programs and operations.**
- Keep the agency head and the Congress fully and currently informed of problems in agency programs and operations.**

To ensure objectivity, the IG Act empowers the IG with:

- Independence to determine what reviews to perform.**
- Access to all information necessary for the reviews.**
- Authority to publish findings and recommendations based on the reviews.**

Vision

By conducting independent and objective audits, investigations, and evaluations, we are agents of positive change striving for continuous improvement in the Social Security Administration's programs, operations, and management and in our own office.

Executive Summary

OBJECTIVE

The objective of the audit, initiated in response to a request from the Chairman of the Senate Special Committee on Aging, was to assess the effectiveness of the Market Measurement Program (MMP) and identify any other efforts to improve customer service that should be implemented.

BACKGROUND

The Social Security Administration (SSA) has historically collected information on its customers' perception of the service it provides. Over the last few years, these efforts were criticized as being fragmented, untimely, and uncoordinated. As a result, in 1996, SSA contracted with the Pacific Consulting Group (PCG) to assess SSA's market research program. PCG recommended a comprehensive program of data collection and reporting mechanisms that would provide an integrated market measurement system. The Commissioner, endorsing this approach, approved the MMP in February 1998. MMP encompasses a variety of data collection activities that are intended to provide SSA with the information it needs to fully understand the expectations and level of satisfaction of its total market—customers, employees, and stakeholders.

RESULTS OF REVIEW

MMP represents a comprehensive and coordinated program of data collection, analyses, and reporting that should assist SSA in identifying customer expectations and monitoring service delivery more effectively. While MMP addresses major weaknesses previously reported in SSA's customer service monitoring, we believe that additional opportunities exist for MMP to more effectively collect and use information. Additionally, phases of MMP implementation have slipped from scheduled timeframes and close monitoring will be needed to ensure that the future schedule is maintained. Also, SSA made operational changes in response to feedback from MMP activities and additional opportunities for changes continue to exist.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

MMP provides a mechanism that should allow SSA to better plan, implement, and monitor service delivery. Information received during focus groups will assist SSA in identifying the level of service that customers desire. Additionally, feedback collected during interaction tracking will provide SSA information on the level of customer satisfaction with its service. Further, MMP will only be effective if SSA uses the information collected to respond timely to customer expectations and the need for

service improvements. To ensure the most effective use of customer service information collected, we recommend that SSA:

- Target specific groups of recipients receiving SSA notices through focus groups and interaction tracking.
- Encourage the uniform use of customer comment cards by field offices (FO), teleservice centers, and hearings offices.
- Revise the customer comment card for FOs to determine whether the customer had an appointment.
- Centralize and analyze customer feedback received through comment cards to identify any systemic service delivery issues that may need to be addressed.
- Evaluate whether, and the extent to which, the Talking and Listening to Customers (TLC) system may duplicate comment cards.
- Coordinate regional and local customer service studies and the central analysis of their results to permit identification of systemic issues.
- Accelerate implementation of MMP phases to attain scheduled data collections and analysis and closely monitor implementation of MMP phases to limit any further delays.
- Conduct a more in-depth analysis of operational data and customer satisfaction information to ensure that customer expectations, operational data, Agency performance and Vision 2010 goals are consistent.

AGENCY COMMENTS

SSA agreed with six of our recommendations and disagreed with two. The full text of SSA's comments is included in Appendix B.

- SSA did not agree with recommendation 2 "encourage the uniform use of customer cards by field offices, teleservice centers, and hearings offices." SSA believes that local managers should have the discretion to use comment cards in the most efficient and effective manner they perceive because the card is designed to inform managers about their local service.
- SSA also disagreed with recommendation 4 "centralize and analyze customer feedback received through comment cards to identify any systemic service delivery issues that may need to be addressed." SSA's rationale is that the comment card is designed to monitor service at the local level, and that the various MMP data collection activities, as well as the TLC system, will provide centralized information to allow identification of service delivery issues at the national level.

SSA responded that the information on regional survey activity may be dated, but indicated that recently completed regional surveys would be input into the MMP Clearinghouse so that the data can be compared to other customer data. In addition, SSA reported that an employee would be on detail to analyze the Clearinghouse data for service and systemic issues and to monitor any regional activity.

In its response, SSA provided technical comments that were incorporated in this final report, as appropriate.

OIG RESPONSE

We are pleased that SSA agreed with most of our recommendations, and has, or plans to, implement most of them. We believe that activity conducted to date under the MMP and in the pilot TLC sites, along with action in response to our recommendations, will help ensure that SSA is effectively and efficiently collecting, analyzing, and using data on customer expectation and satisfaction.

However, concerning the use of comment cards, we acknowledge the cards' primary function to provide feedback to managers on the quality of local service, we also believe that the usefulness of the cards can be enhanced through uniform use. Scientific and consistent distribution methodologies would provide for the collection of the most accurate and efficient information for managers to use in improving service.

As we have previously reported, we continue to believe that the comment card can be an inexpensive and effective tool at both the local and national levels to obtain customer satisfaction information and to identify systemic service delivery issues. Additionally, until the TLC is fully implemented, SSA lacks a centralized customer complaint system and mechanism to analyze all complaints. The centralized analysis of comment cards could fill this void until the TLC is fully operational.

When data on regional survey activity was provided, OPSOS indicated that it was the most recent information collected. Regardless of the extent of regional activity, we believe that information about it needs to be centrally collected and analyzed. We believe SSA's agreement to include regional survey results into the MMP and to analyze data in the MMP Clearinghouse for service and systemic issues responds to Recommendation 6 to coordinate regional and local customer service studies and the central analysis of their results to permit identification of systemic issues.

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Acronyms

CSET	Customer Service Executive Team
DI	Disability Insurance
FO	Field Office
FY	Fiscal Year
MMP	Market Measurement Program
OCSI	Office of Customer Service Integration
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
OPI	Office of Public Inquiries
OPSOS	Office of Public Service and Operations Support
OQA	Office of Quality Assurance and Performance Assessment
PCG	Pacific Consulting Group
RSI	Retirement and Survivors Insurance
SSA	Social Security Administration
SSI	Supplemental Security Income
TLC	Talking and Listening to Customers

Introduction

OBJECTIVE

The objective of the audit, initiated in response to a request from the Chairman of the Senate Special Committee on Aging, was to assess the effectiveness of the Market Measurement Program (MMP) and identify any other efforts to improve customer service that should be implemented.

BACKGROUND

The Social Security Administration (SSA) has been sensitive to customer service and has historically collected information on its customers' perception of the service it provides. For instance, an annual customer satisfaction survey has been conducted since 1984,¹ and periodic surveys to gauge customer satisfaction with the 800-number began in 1989. SSA's efforts to monitor customer service were criticized as being uncoordinated and not comprehensive. The Office of the Inspector General (OIG) reported² that SSA's efforts to monitor service to the public were fragmented, and that all customers were not included in the annual satisfaction survey. The Pacific Consulting Group (PCG), a consultant hired by SSA to review its market research program, recommended a more comprehensive approach to measuring customer expectations and satisfaction. In its report, "Market Measurement to Support Planning and Operations at the Social Security Administration," April 1997, PCG concluded that SSA's market research did not: (1) adequately cover customer segments; (2) cover all time periods, and was not timely; and (3) report comprehensive data on employers and the general public. PCG recommended a comprehensive program of data collection and reporting mechanisms intended to allow SSA to better plan service delivery improvements, implement more effective execution, and allow easy reporting of performance with the most current and comprehensive data.

SSA's Customer Service Executive Team (CSET) recommended this approach in its October 1997 report, and the Commissioner authorized its implementation in February 1998. Referred to as MMP, this approach includes a variety of data collection activities that are intended to provide SSA with the information it needs to fully understand its total market—customers, employees, and stakeholders. Data collection activities are tailored to each of these three segments. In addition, all customer service

¹ The General Accounting Office conducted this survey until 1987, then it was conducted by the Office of the Inspector General, and, finally in 1997, by the Office of Quality Assurance and Performance Assessment.

² "Cataloging Social Security's Customer Service Monitoring" (A-02-96-02202), September 1997, and "Performance Measure Review: Evaluation of the Thirteenth Annual Social Security Customer Satisfaction Survey Data" (A-02-97-01004), January 1999.

monitoring activity is to be coordinated by the Office of Customer Service Integration (OCSI). SSA believes that the success of MMP is critical to achieving its strategic objective for customer satisfaction.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The Commissioner established CSET to develop recommendations based upon PCG's report. To assess the effectiveness of MMP we determined the extent to which recommendations by CSET were implemented. We also reviewed reports by the General Accounting Office, OIG, SSA, and PCG to document previously reported weaknesses and concerns with SSA's customer service monitoring activities, and assessed the extent to which such concerns are, or will be, addressed by MMP.

We documented the status of each of the six major collection and reporting mechanisms under MMP, and reviewed SSA organizational changes made to implement MMP. To assess the effectiveness of MMP efforts, we reviewed focus group and interaction tracking reports issued under the MMP customer market umbrella, identified data collection efforts planned, and documented corrective actions taken relating to customer service.

Further, we discussed various MMP implementation issues with officials from the OCSI, the Office of Quality Assurance and Performance Assessment (OQA), the Office of Communications, the Office of Public Service and Operations Support (OPSOS), the Office of Public Inquiries (OPI), the Office of External Affairs, and the Office of Hearings and Appeals.

The entity audited was the Office of Customer Service Integration within the Office of the Commissioner. We conducted our work in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. We performed our work in New York, New York and Baltimore, Maryland from November 10, 1999 through April 30, 2000.

Results of Review

MMP RESPONDS TO PRIOR CONCERNS WITH SSA'S MONITORING OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

MMP is designed to address criticism that SSA's customer service monitoring did not address all customer segments and was uncoordinated. OIG reports and PCG criticized SSA's customer service monitoring as being fragmented, uncoordinated, and untimely. For instance, PCG found that, while SSA collected significant information from retirement and disability claimants, little was known about the expectations and satisfaction of customers applying for Social Security cards or those already receiving benefits. To address these shortcomings, PCG recommended a comprehensive program of data collection, analyses, and reporting mechanisms to monitor the needs of SSA's different customers. These mechanisms include customers of SSA services, as well as employees and major stakeholders, such as Congress, advocacy groups, and employers. SSA's CSET developed the MMP from PCG's recommendations and the Commissioner implemented it in February 1998. OCSI was established to coordinate all SSA customer service monitoring activities.

A key principle of MMP is market segmentation, in which a customer market is divided into homogeneous groups that are reached with distinct service offerings or have distinct service needs. SSA segmented its market into 10 specific classes of customers to obtain data previously not collected. The classes of customers are designated as follows:

- Enumeration;
- Retirement and Survivors Insurance (RSI) initial claims;
- Disability Insurance (DI) initial claims;
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI) initial claims;
- Appeal decisions;
- RSI post-entitlement changes;
- DI post-entitlement changes;
- SSI post-entitlement changes;
- Earnings records; and
- General information.

Once market segments are identified, the MMP approach uses various data collection and reporting mechanisms to gather information on customer service needs and expectations and to monitor customer satisfaction. SSA employs the following five data collection and reporting mechanisms to monitor its customer market.

Segment Analyses - SSA conducts focus groups with small groups for each of the 10 customer segments to identify distinct needs, followed by more in-depth and extreme surveys to more completely develop the needs.

Interaction tracking - SSA conducts surveys twice a year to obtain customers' perception of service provided in a field office (FO) or hearings office, through the national 800-number, local FO telephone, or via the Internet.

Special Studies - SSA collects information through focus groups or surveys about specific issues or new initiatives.

Comment Cards - SSA makes them available through FOs, teleservice centers, and hearings offices, to obtain feedback on their service.

Best Practices Inventory - SSA's Intranet publicizes effective local office customer service initiatives.

Also, PCG recommended that SSA develop an agency-wide customer complaint tracking system as an additional data collection and reporting mechanism. In response, SSA is independently developing Talking and Listening to Customers (TLC), an automated system to capture and analyze customer complaints and compliments.

OPPORTUNITIES EXIST TO MORE EFFECTIVELY USE CURRENTLY COLLECTED INFORMATION

SSA historically collected information on its customer service. For instance, SSA traditionally conducted an annual customer satisfaction survey³ and a semiannual survey of 800-number caller satisfaction.⁴ MMP continues or expands some of these activities and creates additional data gathering efforts. See Appendix A for a detailed schedule of planned MMP activities. We believe there are additional opportunities to make the MMP data collection activities more effective through greater coordination of information collected and additional interaction tracking surveys.

Notices to Recipients Are Not Subject to Interaction Tracking

SSA annually sends over 250 million notices to recipients regarding their benefits, such as initial eligibility, requests for information, and identification of overpayment. SSA notices have been the subject of controversy and various initiatives. To date, feedback about notices had been collected through the annual Customer Satisfaction Survey if the surveyed customer had been a notice recipient. However, this approach may not provide a representative sample of notice recipients nor be reflective of particular notices. While PCG recommended that solicited and unsolicited mail customers be targeted as part of the 800-number through interaction tracking, MMP does not specifically target notice recipients with an interaction tracking survey. SSA staff advised us that notice recipients are not specifically included in interaction tracking

³ The Fiscal Year 1999 Survey, published in February 2000, is the final Survey. Beginning in Fiscal Year 2000, customer satisfaction will be measured through MMP interaction tracking surveys.

⁴ OQA has conducted semiannual surveys of the 800-number callers since 1989.

because it would be difficult to identify recipients. We believe that recipients of notices targeted for study could be identified and sampled at the time notices are generated.

Comment Card Use and Analysis Are Not Centralized

MMP includes comment cards to solicit feedback on customer service at the local level. However, since the use of comment cards is varied, some of the feedback does not allow for meaningful analysis, and the information is not centrally analyzed. While SSA has historically viewed comment cards as a local mechanism to obtain information on customer service, we believe that actions can be taken to enhance their usefulness both nationally and locally. Further, the effect of the proposed TLC initiative upon comment cards needs to be evaluated.

In a 1997 report,⁵ OIG concluded that distribution of comment cards should be more consistent. In its April 1997 report, PCG discussed comment cards and similarly recommended that the: (1) sampling, administration, and analysis procedures should be enhanced and made uniform to the extent possible; and (2) data entry, analysis, and reporting should be centralized to permit comparisons. However, neither the method of distribution nor the extent comment cards are used is known because the use and accounting for them is at the discretion of local FO managers.

In response to recommendations made by OIG and PCG, OPSOS issued a revised comment card in January 1999 for use by FOs and teleservice centers. While the revision solicits more detailed information on satisfaction with SSA service commitments, an evaluation of comments against SSA performance measures cannot always be made. For instance, input is solicited on the extent to which a customer waited prior to being served—30 minutes or less, or more than 30 minutes. However, no information is requested on whether the customer had an appointment. The existence of an appointment is a key factor in the commitment to service—SSA pledges that one will be served within 10 minutes if an appointment had been made, and within 30 minutes without an appointment. Collecting information on time waited, without knowing whether the customer had an appointment, does not allow a complete evaluation against the performance standard.

While comment cards are a useful tool for local managers to measure their performance, the information collected also relates to how well the locations are meeting the SSA customer pledge and related performance measures. As such, this information can supplement national level data obtained from the various interaction tracking surveys, provide timely data, as well as identify any systemic customer service issues. The TLC system is intended to provide a centralized data base of customer feedback. Until TLC is implemented, SSA will continue to track complaints received by

⁵ In April 1997, OIG reported in “Social Security Administration’s Use of Comment Cards,” (A-02-96-02203), that 29 percent of SSA offices did not use the comment card, and in those that did, some customer populations were excluded from participation.

OPI⁶ and through comment cards. Consequently, without the central analysis of comment card information, SSA currently lacks a mechanism to analyze customer complaints for systemic issues.

Use of Comment Card and TLC System May Be Duplicative

Comment cards and the TLC system are designed to allow a customer to express a complaint about service received. Use of the comment card is intended to be independently at the customer's initiative, while the TLC system envisions input by an SSA employee of either customer complaints or compliments. While comment cards and the TLC system have their unique uses, we believe there is the potential that operation of both could confuse and cause a burden upon the customer. Further, if customers opt to use the comment card over the TLC system, SSA will continue to lack a centralized repository of complaints.

Regional and Local Studies Are Not Centrally Monitored

Regional or local offices may conduct customer satisfaction surveys without obtaining approval or submitting results to OCSI. While OCSI did not know the extent to which these activities may be undertaken, recent information collected by OPSOS disclosed that 3 of 10 regions conduct such studies. While the MMP Clearinghouse is intended to be the repository of such studies, only one region had posted a study to the Clearinghouse as of April 2000. Central reporting and analysis of local studies would ensure that systemic issues are identified and addressed.

MULTI-YEAR IMPLEMENTATION OF MMP HAS EXPERIENCED SOME DELAYS

MMP represents a comprehensive multi-year approach to identify the needs and satisfaction of different customer markets. While MMP encompasses many previously conducted data collection activities, new and expanded activities will require significant resources. Due to resource constraints and implementation impediments, certain phases of MMP have slipped from the timeframes initially established, and full implementation is several years away. The number and magnitude of the initiatives under MMP will require the effective coordination of all related activities.

Implementation of segment analyses and the TLC system have been delayed (refer to Appendix A). The first round of segment analyses, planned for each identified customer segment approximately every 3 years, was initially scheduled for completion in Fiscal Year (FY) 2000. As of April 2000, the first round of segment analyses are planned to extend into FY 2001. Three of the planned eight segment analyses are scheduled for completion in FY 2000, two in FY 2001, and three have not yet been scheduled. Implementation of the TLC system has also slipped from the originally planned

⁶ OPI centrally receives complaints. Those that relate to specific FOs are forwarded to the respective offices, and those addressed to the Commissioner are tracked by OPI. In Fiscal Year 1999, OPI tracked approximately 67,000 complaints.

timeframes. TLC field tests were scheduled for implementation in August 1998. As of April 2000, a limited pilot of the TLC system started in September 2000. Additionally, implementation of comment cards in hearings offices was scheduled for FY 1999, then FY 2000, and is now planned for FY 2001.

ADDITIONAL OPPORTUNITIES EXIST TO USE MMP FEEDBACK TO AFFECT SERVICE DELIVERY CHANGES AND PERFORMANCE GOAL SETTING

SSA has historically responded to feedback it received through customer monitoring to affect service delivery changes and establish related performance goals. For instance, in response to information obtained that customers prefer conducting business via the telephone, and that satisfaction is affected by how quickly callers access the number, SSA has increased caller options on its 800-number telephone service, and is working toward improving access. Similarly, the Personal Earnings and Benefit Estimate Statement was redesigned as the Social Security Statement in response to customer input.

Additional opportunities exist to use customer monitoring to improve service delivery. For example, SSA annually mails over 250 million notices about benefit status, such as initial eligibility, requests for information, and identification of overpayment, which have been the source of much dissatisfaction. Despite this dissatisfaction, performance goals for notice clarity have not been established. On a positive note, SSA has established notice improvement as a key initiative and has redesigned some of its more common notices.

The current version of SSA customer service standards was developed based upon a survey conducted in 1994. During FY 2000, SSA completed a special study as part of MMP to update its standards for customer service. Updating the customer service standards will be an important task because most of the information collected through MMP is subjective, representing how customers perceive they were served.

For example, operational data on the 800-number disclosed that approximately 92 percent of customers reach the 800-number on their first attempt. The August 1999 OQA 800-number customer interaction tracking survey reported that 54 percent of those callers had reported calling unsuccessfully earlier in the day. SSA staff with whom we spoke had not analyzed this apparent discrepancy and could not offer any specific reasons for it. They attributed the difference between the two measures to the fact that the interaction tracking survey measures customer perception as to what is a successful call, which may not relate to the operational measure.

While the interaction tracking survey documents perceptions, it also solicits the same quantifiable information, such as whether a call had been made earlier in the day, as does the operational data. The difference may lie in the definition of a successful call. SSA needs to be aware of these differences and adjust its strategic planning and performance measures accordingly.

Meaningful analysis and assessment of performance can be made only when the service expected by customers is consistent with the performance goals established by SSA. In addition, when customer perceptions differ from that indicated by operational data, analysis is required to determine if adjustments to performance goals or actual measurement are needed.

SSA has recently released a service vision for 2010 that will assess future customer needs and expectations. This vision provides a high-level summary of the principles on which SSA will base its service provisions and delivery options. This is a very important undertaking, given the forecasted changes in both SSA's customer universe and the workforce. This effort will also need to be coordinated within MMP.

Conclusions and Recommendations

MMP provides a mechanism that should allow SSA to better plan, implement, and monitor service delivery. Information received during focus groups will assist SSA to identify the level of service that customers desire. Additionally, feedback collected during interaction tracking will provide SSA with information on the level of customer service satisfaction. Further, MMP will only be effective if SSA uses the information collected to respond timely to customer expectations and the need for service improvements.

To ensure the most effective use of customer service information collected, we recommend that SSA:

1. Target specific groups of recipients receiving SSA notices through focus groups and interaction tracking.
2. Encourage the uniform use of customer comment cards by FOs, teleservice centers, and hearings offices.
3. Revise the customer comment card for FOs to determine whether the customer had an appointment.
4. Centralize and analyze customer feedback received through comment cards to identify any systemic service delivery issues that may need to be addressed.
5. Evaluate whether, and the extent to which, the TLC system may duplicate comment cards.
6. Coordinate regional and local customer service studies and the central analysis of their results to permit identification of systemic issues.
7. Accelerate implementation of MMP phases to attain scheduled data collections and analysis and closely monitor implementation of MMP phases to limit any further delays.
8. Conduct a more in-depth analysis of operational data and customer satisfaction information to ensure that customer expectations, operational data, and Agency performance and Vision 2010 goals are consistent.

AGENCY COMMENTS

SSA agreed with six of our recommendations and disagreed with two. The full text of SSA's comments is included in Appendix B.

- SSA did not agree with recommendation 2 “encourage the uniform use of customer cards by field offices, teleservice centers, and hearings offices.” SSA believes that local managers should have the discretion to use comment cards in the most efficient and effective manner they perceive because the card is designed to inform managers about their local service.
- SSA disagreed with recommendation 4 “centralize and analyze customer feedback received through comment cards to identify any systemic service delivery issues that may need to be addressed.” SSA’s rationale is that the comment card is designed to monitor service at the local level, and that the various MMP data collection activities, as well as the TLC system, will provide centralized information to allow identification of service delivery issues at the national level.

SSA responded that the information on regional survey activity may be dated, but indicated that recently completed regional surveys would be input into the MMP Clearinghouse so that the data can be compared to other customer data. In addition, SSA reported that an employee would be on detail to analyze the Clearinghouse data for service and systemic issues and to monitor any regional activity.

In its response, SSA provided technical comments that were incorporated in this final report, as appropriate.

OIG RESPONSE

We are pleased that SSA has agreed with most of our recommendations, and did, or plans to, take action on most of them. We believe that activity conducted to date under the MMP and in the pilot TLC sites, along with action in response to our recommendations, will help ensure that SSA is effectively and efficiently collecting, analyzing, and using data on customer expectation and satisfaction.

However, concerning the use of comment cards, we acknowledge the cards’ primary function to provide feedback to managers on the quality of local service, we also believe that the usefulness of the cards can be enhanced through uniform use. Scientific and consistent distribution methodologies would provide for the collection of the most accurate and efficient information for managers to use in improving service.

As we have previously reported⁷, we continue to believe that the comment card can be an inexpensive and effective tool at both the local and national levels to obtain customer satisfaction information and to identify systemic service delivery issues. Additionally,

⁷ “Social Security Administration’s Use of Comment Cards”, (A-02-96-02203).

until the TLC is fully implemented, SSA lacks a centralized customer complaint system and mechanism to analyze all complaints. The centralized analysis of comment cards could fill this void until the TLC is fully operational.

When data on regional survey activity was provided, OPSOS indicated that it was the most recent information collected. Regardless of the extent of regional activity, we believe that information about it needs to be centrally collected and analyzed. We believe SSA's agreement to include regional survey results into the MMP and to analyze data in the MMP Clearinghouse for service and systemic issues responds to our recommendation (Recommendation 6) to coordinate regional and local customer service studies and the central analysis of their results to permit identification of systemic issues.

Appendices

Schedule of the Market Measurement Program's Studies, Surveys, and Reports

Method of Data Collection	Targeted Customer	Reports Issued	Reports Planned to Issue
Segment Analysis: All conducted on a 3-year cycle	Disability post-entitlement	February 2000	February 2001
	Appeals		June 2000
	Disability initial claims		July 2000
	Nondisability post-entitlement		February 2001
	Nondisability initial claims		April 2001
	Enumeration		To be determined
	Earnings		To be determined
	General inquiries		To be determined
Interaction Tracking: All conducted Semiannually	800-number callers conducted in February and August	July 1999 and December 1999	May 2000 and December 2000; May 2001
	Field office callers conducted in November and May	March 2000	March 2001
	Field office and hearings office visitors conducted in January and July	January 2000	May 2000 and December 2000; May 2001
	Social Security Administration website visitors conducted in January and July	June 1999	May 2000 and November 2000 May 2001

Method of Data Collection	Targeted Customer	Reports Issued	Reports Planned to Issue	
Special Studies: Conducted on an ad-hoc basis	Social Security statement	November 1998		
	Field offices with automated attendant/voice mail	December 1998		
	Immediate claims taking	July 1999		
	Full process model pilot	August 1999		
	Customer service standards	January 2000		
	Kiosk enumeration	March 2000		
	800-number automated services	March 2000		
	Disability claims manager			December 2000
	Notice clarity			February 2001

Agency Comments



SOCIAL SECURITY

MEMORANDUM

March 5, 2001

Refer To: S1J-3

To: James G. Huse, Jr.
Inspector General

William A. Halter *Walt*
Acting Commissioner of Social Security

Subject: Office of the Inspector General (OIG) Draft Report, "Review of the Social Security Administration's Organizational Capacity to Monitor and Plan for Customer Service Initiatives" (A-02-00-20020)—INFORMATION

We appreciate the OIG's efforts in conducting this review. Our comments on the specific recommendations are attached. Staff questions may be referred to Dan Sweeney on extension 5-1957.

Attachment

COMMENTS ON THE OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL (OIG) DRAFT REPORT,
"REVIEW OF THE SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION'S ORGANIZATIONAL
CAPACITY TO MONITOR AND PLAN FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE INITIATIVES"
(A-02-00-20020)

Recommendation 1

Target specific groups of recipients receiving Social Security Administration (SSA) notices through focus groups and interaction tracking.

SSA Comment

Because SSA has so many different types of notices covering so many issues, we do not believe an interaction tracking type of methodology can provide the specific and substantive information SSA needs to make notice improvements. However, consistent with the thrust of OIG's recommendation, in fiscal year (FY) 2001, our Office of Quality Assurance and Performance Assessment (OQA) will undertake a notice study that will gather information from recipients of SSA's most problematic notices. This will establish a baseline so notice improvements can be assessed via subsequent surveys.

The OIG draft report makes the statement that the Pacific Consulting Group (PCG) recommended to SSA that solicited and unsolicited mail customers be targeted through interaction tracking, implying PCG recommended that SSA target specific groups receiving notices. This is not correct. PCG recommended that SSA gather information about mail interactions from the 800 Number Caller Survey. That is, the survey would ask 800 number callers if they had received any notices from SSA, and if so, what did they think of the notices in general. PCG's methodology was not designed to provide the specificity on notices or from groups of notice recipients that OIG envisions.

Recommendation 2

Encourage the uniform use of customer comment cards by field offices (FO), teleservice centers, and hearings offices.

All offices have received instructions from Headquarters encouraging the use of the comment cards and suggesting methods for use. Because the comment card has been designed to inform local managers about their local service, managers have the discretion to use the cards in the manner most efficient and effective for them.

Recommendation 3

Revise the customer comment card for FOs to determine whether the customer had an appointment.

Comment

We agree that knowing whether the customer had an appointment would be beneficial and will revise the FO comment card to include appointment information once the current stock runs out.

Recommendation 4

Centralize and analyze customer feedback received through comment cards to identify any systemic service delivery issues that may need to be addressed.

SSA Comment

We disagree. We continue to believe that the Market Measurement Program's (MMP) interaction tracking, customer segment analysis and special study methodologies as well as the Talking and Listening to Customers (TLC) system provide the Agency with centralized information that allows us to identify service delivery issues at the national level. The purpose of the comment cards is to monitor service at the local level.

Recommendation 5

Evaluate whether, and the extent to which, the TLC system may duplicate comment cards.

SSA Comment

We agree and have in place a plan that will address this recommendation. We have hired a contractor, KPMG, to assist us with, among other things, evaluating the operation of the TLC pilot. Specifically, in the case of TLC forms, KPMG is looking at such issues as:

- Potential customer confusion between the TLC form and the comment card. We are testing use of both the customer comment card and TLC forms together in half of the pilot sites, while testing the TLC form alone in the other half.
- Overlap of information on these two forms.
- Customer preference for one form over the other.
- Cost effectiveness.
- Unique uses, costs and benefits of each form.

At the end of the pilot, KPMG will submit a report outlining its observations, findings and recommendations on this issue.

Recommendation 6

Coordinate regional and local customer service studies and the central analysis of their results to permit identification of systemic issues.

Comment

It appears that your information about survey activities in the regions may be dated. At this point, Kansas City is the only region that undertakes a formal customer satisfaction survey. The other regions that had been gathering formal customer satisfaction information in the past stopped due to lack of resources. We are inputting Kansas City's latest customer survey report into the centralized repository of direct input, the MMP Clearinghouse, so findings can be used and compared with other customer data. In addition, the Office of Customer Service Integration has brought in a field employee on detail to more closely focus on analyzing the MMP data in the Clearinghouse for service and systemic issues at the national level. This function includes keeping in touch with the regions to monitor any activities related to customer service studies and analyzing any regional customer data as it comes in.

Recommendation 7

Accelerate implementation of MMP phases to attain scheduled data collections and analysis and closely monitor implementation of MMP phases to limit any further delays.

SSA Comment

We acknowledge that delays in implementation of the customer segment analyses have taken place. Because information about needs and expectations of all customer groups is critical to our Vision 2010 gap analysis and project implementation (where we need to examine a full body of data from all customer groups), accelerated implementation is desirable. Therefore, we will find ways to accelerate our data collection and analysis capacity.

In reference to TLC, although we would like to have had an earlier start on the pilot, we chose and carried out a design and development plan that deferred implementation in favor of thorough and comprehensive preparation for the pilot. We believe the payoff was greater participation and acceptance by hundreds of employees and an ultimately smoother launch of the pilot. The TLC is currently being piloted in 65 sites. Based on pilot results which will identify the most cost-effective way of collecting these data, we will begin national implementation.

Recommendation 8

Conduct a more in-depth analysis of operational data and customer satisfaction information to ensure that customer expectations, operational data, and Agency performance and Vision 2010 goals are consistent.

Comment

We fully understand the importance of integrating customer feedback, performance goals, operational performance and strategic planning. To this end, as we pursue our 2010 vision, we will use MMP data to "refresh" the vision and ensure that the vision remains consistent with changing customer needs and expectations.

OIG Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

OIG Contacts

Frederick C. Nordhoff, Director, Financial Management and Performance
Monitoring Audit Division (410) 966-6676

Timothy Nee, Deputy Director (212) 264-5295

Acknowledgments

In addition to those named above:

John P. Harrison, Senior Auditor-in-Charge

Annette DeRito, Program Analyst

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