



Highlights of [GAO-05-735](#), a report to the Committee on Finance, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The Social Security Administration (SSA) at some point touches the life of nearly every American. Each day thousands of people contact SSA to file claims, update records, and request information from its 1,300 field offices, website, and national toll-free 800 number. Implemented nationwide in 1989, SSA's 800-number has become a principal contact point for millions of individuals seeking agency services. Congressional requesters asked GAO to review the quality of SSA's 800 number in terms of caller access and agent accuracy of response and courtesy.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that SSA take steps to (1) increase callers' access to agent services, (2) determine why agents fail to comply with SSA requirements when handling calls, and (3) establish uniform procedures for documenting and assessing customers' agent-related complaints. SSA agreed with the first two recommendations, but disagreed with the third, saying that its consistently high courtesy rates demonstrates that its present approach is working and taking any additional measures to improve courtesy would not be cost-effective. GAO maintains that routinely documenting and analyzing customer complaints could help SSA identify callers' concerns and reinforce the agency's commitment to quality "citizen-centered" service.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-735.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Barbara Bobbjerg at (202) 512-7215 or bovbjergb@gao.gov.

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Additional Actions Needed in Ongoing Efforts to Improve 800-Number Service

What GAO Found

Despite making improvements to its 800-number service, SSA still has difficulty keeping pace with caller demand for agent assistance. In 2001, SSA upgraded its 800-number network so that all callers could either access its automated services or be routed to the next available agent at any site in the network—a feat not possible under the previous system. The new network also enhanced SSA's ability to monitor and manage call traffic, agent availability, and network operations in real-time to ensure the network's integrity and the consistent delivery of services. SSA also expanded its automated and agent-assisted services accessible through the 800-number network. However, SSA's expansion of its automated services to reduce agent call burden has not had its intended effect, as callers continue to show a strong preference for agent assistance. In fiscal year 2004, about 51 million of the more than 71 million callers requested to speak to an agent. However, 8.7 million, or 17 percent, of these calls did not get through to an agent—a 2 percentage point increase over the previous year.

SSA has taken steps to help agents provide callers with accurate information and consistent services, but still has problems with agents assisting callers in line with agency policies and procedures. SSA's training curriculum provides agents with a comprehensive overview of SSA programs. Agents are also encouraged to use available on-the-job resources, including a customized computer application that helps agents provide consistent service and accurate responses. Nevertheless, from 2001 through 2003, SSA did not meet its 90 percent target for service accuracy—that is, agents' performance in handling non-payment related issues in accordance with agency requirements. Although SSA has taken several actions to help agents improve their performance, including mandating agent use of the computer application, it has not yet determined why agent compliance with agency policies continues to fall short.

SSA trains and monitors agents for courtesy and conducts periodic customer satisfaction surveys, but does not routinely capture all customer complaints about alleged agent discourtesy. Agents receive training on developing their interviewing and interpersonal skills, and SSA monitors agents to determine whether or not they are providing courteous service to callers. SSA monitoring indicates that agent courtesy levels are high. SSA solicits limited customer feedback on agent courtesy in its annual surveys and compiles general ratings, but these surveys do not ask callers for the reasons behind the ratings. Callers to the 800 number do complain of agent discourtesy, but SSA does not routinely document and assess all complaints. Some call center staff told us that when they receive allegations of agent discourtesy, they typically apologize for the discourteous service and may proceed to assist the caller without recording the complaint. SSA has feedback mechanisms in place to capture caller complaints, but these mechanisms do not do so in a manner that allows SSA to assess complaints and identify corrective actions needed.