

The Social Security Administration's Telephone Services

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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.