
**OFFICE OF
THE INSPECTOR GENERAL**

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

**CUSTOMER WAITING TIMES IN THE
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION'S
FIELD OFFICES**

October 2010

A-04-10-11034

AUDIT REPORT



Mission

By conducting independent and objective audits, evaluations and investigations, we inspire public confidence in the integrity and security of SSA's programs and operations and protect them against fraud, waste and abuse. We provide timely, useful and reliable information and advice to Administration officials, 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

We strive for continual improvement in SSA's programs, operations and management by proactively seeking new ways to prevent and deter fraud, waste and abuse. We commit to integrity and excellence by supporting an environment that provides a valuable public service while encouraging employee development and retention and fostering diversity and innovation.



SOCIAL SECURITY

MEMORANDUM

Date: October 27, 2010

Refer To:

To: The Commissioner

From: Inspector General

Subject: Customer Waiting Times in the Social Security Administration's Field Offices
(A-04-10-11034)

OBJECTIVE

The objectives of our review were to determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) (1) had adequate procedures to monitor the length of time visitors waited for service at its field offices and, when applicable, (2) took actions to shorten long wait times.

BACKGROUND

SSA administers its programs and services through a network of approximately 1,300 field offices that directly serve the public in communities throughout the United States and its territories. Field offices are SSA's primary point of face-to-face contact with the public. Field offices are responsible for various workloads, including processing disability, retirement, and survivors claims; issuing new and replacement Social Security cards; and updating beneficiaries' records for a multitude of post-entitlement actions.

In many of SSA's busiest field offices, staff may have only about 1 hour each day before the office opens to the public to prepare the daily schedule of appointments, attend training, read policy updates, and process pending claims and post-entitlement actions. Once the staff begins serving the public, they may spend a majority of their day interviewing visitors and working on time-sensitive actions. After a field office closes to the public, employees may use the remaining workday to process other actions.

SSA has experienced a steady increase in the number of visitors to its field offices. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2009, SSA reported 45.1 million visits, compared to only 41.9 million visits in FY 2006.

SSA's automated Visitor Intake Process (VIP) helps control all stages of in-office visits and scheduled appointments. Additionally, VIP provides management information regarding the number of visitors, wait times, reason and duration of visits, and number

of people who left the field office without service. Managers may customize VIP information at the regional, district, and field office levels.

VIP requires that each visitor check in at an automated VIP kiosk where they receive a numbered ticket. SSA representatives announce the visitor's ticket number to notify the customer that staff is available for the interview. Wait times begin when the visitor checks in at the VIP kiosk and end at the point of the first substantive interview.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

To accomplish our objective, we obtained and analyzed 21 months of VIP visitor wait time data for the period August 2008 through April 2010.¹ We then distributed a questionnaire to each of SSA's 10 Regional Commissioners. Each Regional Commissioner was asked to provide detailed answers to wait time-related questions. Specifically, the questionnaire solicited responses as to whether the Regional Office (1) established wait time goals; (2) monitored wait times; (3) provided guidance on wait time issues; and (4) took actions to improve wait times, when applicable. We also asked the Regional Commissioners to explain why certain field offices had 3 or more months (during our analysis period) where 20 percent or more of their visitors waited more than 1 hour for service.

We also visited five field offices in each of the Atlanta and New York Regions. At each of the offices visited, we interviewed management and staff and surveyed 25 visitors. In total, we surveyed 250 visitors to determine (1) their reason for visiting the field office; (2) whether they had attempted to use SSA's online and telephone services; (3) how long they expected to wait at the field office; and (4) their satisfaction with the wait time and service. For further details on our scope and methodology, see Appendix B.

RESULTS OF REVIEW

SSA closely monitored field office wait times at the national, regional, and field office levels. Additionally, the Agency had various initiatives to reduce customer wait times. Based on our review, we believe SSA is focused on providing timely service to its customers—and, the majority of customers we interviewed agreed that SSA was successful in this goal. However, SSA faces many current and future challenges in maintaining and improving this level of service.

For example, a significant number of customers still waited more than 1 hour for service. Additionally, many others left SSA field offices before receiving service. Specifically, during the period March 1, 2009 through April 30, 2010 (the last 14 months

¹ We originally analyzed VIP data for a 12-month period from August 2008 through July 2009. However, during the audit entrance conference in October 2009, SSA requested that we include August and September 2009 wait time data in our analysis. Accordingly, we expanded our scope to include 14 months of VIP data (August 2008 through September 2009). Additionally, to present current and relevant data in this report, we obtained and analyzed VIP data from October 2009 through April 2010. As such, our review included 21 months of wait time data—August 2008 through April 2010.

of our audit period), about 3.1 million visitors waited more than 1 hour for service, and of those visitors, over 330,000 waited more than 2 hours. Further, in FY 2009, about 3.3 million visitors left a field office without receiving service. Although long field office wait times is only one reason visitors may have left without service, not serving these customers may result in repeat visits, increased traffic in field offices, and dissatisfied customers.

To SSA's credit, wait times improved during our audit period. During the first 14 months of our 21-month audit period, 7.5 percent of visitors waited more than 1 hour for service. In comparison, during the last 14 months of the audit period, the percentage of customers who waited more than 1 hour decreased to 6.1 percent. This improvement occurred despite an increase of over 1 million visitors. Additionally, the average visitor wait time for customers without appointments decreased from 21.8 minutes in FY 2009 to 20.1 minutes during the first 7 months of FY 2010.

To meet the challenges it faces in minimizing customer wait times, SSA has focused efforts on several initiatives, which include

- hiring and training additional staff,
- improving online services,
- redesigning VIP,
- implementing video service delivery,
- improving telephone service infrastructure,
- transferring pending workloads from very busy offices to less busy offices, and
- implementing the Space Modernization and Reception Transformation Service (SMART).

We believe SSA should also ensure each of its regions establishes challenging, yet feasible, wait time goals—taking into account each region's unique circumstances. Doing so would provide clear and consistent guidance to field office employees and would help identify offices that may need additional resources or other forms of assistance. Finally, we encourage the Agency to establish mechanisms to ensure regions and field offices share and, if appropriate, adopt best practices for reducing customer wait times.

SOME CUSTOMERS CONTINUE TO EXPERIENCE LONG WAIT TIMES

A significant number of field office visitors experienced long wait times. Specifically, during the 21-month period August 2008 through April 2010, approximately 5.2 million (about 7 percent)—more than 1 in every 15—field office visitors waited more than 1 hour for service. Appendix C details by month the number of customers who waited more than 1 hour.

During the first 14 months of our audit period, 7.5 percent of visitors waited more than 1 hour. This percentage decreased to 6.1 during the last 14 months of our audit period. Although wait times improved during the most recent 7 months of our audit period (October 2009 through April 2010), approximately 1.5 million of SSA's 25.4 million (about 6 percent) field office visitors still waited more than 1 hour for service. In fact, more than 150,000 visitors waited over 2 hours during that same period.

Table 1 details the number of visitors who waited more than 1 hour for service during our audit period.

Table 1: Visitors Who Waited More than 1 Hour for Service

Months	Total Number of Visitors	Number of Visitors Who Waited Over 1 Hour	Percentage of Visitors Who Waited Over 1 Hour
August 2008 Through April 2010 (all 21 months)	74,351,491	5,171,580	6.96%
August 2008 Through September 2009 (first 14 months)	48,944,726	3,654,607	7.47%
March 2009 Through April 2010 (last 14 months)	50,036,486	3,055,760	6.11%
October 2009 Through April 2010 (most recent 7 months)	25,406,765	1,516,973	5.97%

Additionally, a significant number of visitors left a field office without receiving service. That is, after signing in to VIP, a visitor decided not to wait and left the field office without service. During the 4-year period FYs 2006 through 2009, about 13.3 million (7.6 percent) field office visitors left without service. Although we acknowledge that long wait times are not the only reason a customer might decide to leave a field office before receiving assistance, SSA officials with whom we spoke confirmed that it is one cause for these occurrences.

The percent of customers who departed a field office without service declined to 5.9 percent during the first 7 months of FY 2010. However, by not serving customers, field offices may experience repeat customer traffic and decreased customer satisfaction. Table 2 details the number of visitors who left field offices without service from FYs 2006 through 2009.

**Table 2: Visitors Who Left Field Offices Without Receiving Service
FYs 2006 Through 2009**

Fiscal Year	Total Number of Visitors	Visitors Who Left Without Service	Percentage of Visitors Who Left Without Service
2006	41,913,330	3,568,481	8.51%
2007	42,907,070	3,319,003	7.74%
2008	44,457,180	3,125,587	7.03%
2009	45,082,487	3,257,985	7.23%
4-Year Totals	174,360,067	13,271,056	7.61%

CHALLENGES TO SHORTER WAIT TIMES

Although SSA has made progress in addressing and reducing field office wait times, the Agency has identified continued challenges to maintaining and further reducing wait times. For example, in response to our questionnaire, Regional Commissioners cited various reasons why certain field offices had a high percentage of visitors waiting more than 1 hour, including increases in visitors and workloads and attrition of qualified and experienced staff.

Increases in Visitors and Workloads

SSA has experienced a steady increase in the number of field office visitors. From FYs 2006 to 2009, on average, the number of visitors increased by about 1.1 million annually (see Table 3). Additionally, field office visits increased by about 163,000 per month during the first 7 months of FY 2010 (October 2009 through April 2010).

Table 3: Increase in Number of Visitors from FY 2006 Through FY 2009

Fiscal Year	Total Number of Visitors	Increase from Previous Year	Percentage Increase from Previous Year
2006	41,913,330		
2007	42,907,070	993,740	2.4%
2008	44,457,180	1,550,110	3.6%
2009	45,082,487	625,307	1.4%

The aging “baby boomer” population and the Nation’s current weakened economy have resulted in an increase in SSA field office customers and work. SSA projected that in FY 2010, it would receive approximately 400,000 more retirement and disability claims than in FY 2009.

SSA’s customers visit field offices for various reasons, but many come to file benefit claims or apply for an original Social Security number or a replacement Social Security card. In FY 2009, SSA field offices conducted about 5.5 million interviews related to disability, retirement, and survivors claims. Also, in the same year, field office staff completed about 13.9 million interviews related to new or replacement Social Security cards. The disability claim workload is both complex and time-intensive. As part of processing a disability claim, field office staff often helps claimants complete detailed forms about medications, medical treatments, work history, and daily activities. The Social Security card workload has become more complex and labor-intensive as SSA has implemented changes in response to legislation requiring a more detailed scrutiny of Social Security card applicants.

Also affecting the increase in field office visitors is the significant increase in calls to SSA’s national toll-free customer service telephone number. In FY 2009, SSA received almost 86 million calls to its 800-number, an increase of about 3.9 percent from FY 2008. SSA expects the number of callers will continue to increase. SSA’s 35 teleservice centers are responsible for serving callers. Teleservice center staff answers questions, performs changes of address and telephone numbers, processes requests for direct deposit and replacement Medicare cards, and schedules appointments to local field offices for more complex issues.

SSA acknowledged that many callers to the 800-number received a busy signal. SSA was also concerned that the inability to service customers over the 800-number caused more customers to visit their local field office. Of the 250 visitors we interviewed, 34 had attempted to contact SSA via the 800-number. Of these 34 visitors, 18 were unable to complete their business. As such, the customers visited the field office to complete their business.

Insufficient or Inexperienced Staff

Many of SSA's experienced staff could soon retire. SSA estimates that from FY 2009 to FY 2013, it may lose 22 percent of its employees to retirement. The Agency further estimates it will lose 41 percent of its employees to retirement from FY 2009 to FY 2018. Additionally, through retirement and other separations, SSA lost over 4,600 staff in FY 2009 and over 4,800 staff Agency-wide in FY 2010. The loss of experienced staff can initially cause field offices to be less productive because new staff requires significant training, mentoring, and on-the-job experience.

Also, staff training and leave schedules are a constant challenge in making staff available to serve customers. For example, we visited one field office that, in recent months, made significant improvements in reducing its wait times. However, we observed some unusually long wait times during our visit. The field office manager explained on that particular day, only 5 of the 11 claims representatives were available to interview visitors. The other six claims representatives were unavailable for various reasons, including sick and annual leave and jury duty responsibilities.

We recognize that SSA is continually challenged to retain, hire, train, and develop qualified staff. Further, we understand the relationship between the number and experience level of staff and the field office's ability to timely process workloads and interview customers. As such, we emphasize the importance of the Agency's recruitment, training, and employee development initiatives and encourage SSA to properly plan for future staff attrition, amidst growing workloads.

SSA INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE CUSTOMER WAITING TIMES

To meet the challenges of increased visitors and expanding workloads, SSA has committed to several initiatives, as described below.

- SSA plans to hire approximately 900 additional staff—mostly for field offices. The additional staff will support SSA's "stressed office" initiative. As shown in Table 4, 812 of these new employees will be assigned to field offices in 5 SSA regions—New York, Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, and San Francisco. Customer wait times is only one factor in SSA's decision to include an office in this hiring initiative.² However, the allocation of these resources appears reasonable given data indicating these Regions have higher average customer wait times and/or customers waiting more

² To identify a stressed field office, SSA evaluates such factors as the average daily claimant contacts per employee, type and quantity of workloads, percent of non-English speaking visitors, and visitor wait times.

than 1 hour (see Appendix D). The planned increase in staff is in addition to the approximate 1,000 field office staff hired in FY 2009, which SSA funded, in part, with money received under the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009* (ARRA).³

**Table 4: Field Office Staff Hired or to be Hired (as of July 9, 2010)
for the Stressed Office Initiative**

Region	Number of Stressed Offices	Number of Employees Already Hired	Number of Employees to be Hired	Total New Employees for Stressed Offices
Boston	6	10	19	29
New York	50	57	169	226
Philadelphia	11	3	29	32
Atlanta	19	27	56	83
Chicago	20	18	54	72
Dallas	18	56	53	109
Kansas City	1	1	2	3
Denver	2	5	6	11
San Francisco	62	119	203	322
Seattle	1	2	3	5
Totals	190	298	594	892

- In December 2008, SSA launched “iClaim,” a new online (Internet) system with which individuals can apply for retirement benefits and complete a disability application. In FY 2009, over 30 percent of all retirement applications were filed through iClaim. Also, the percentage of disability applications filed online increased to 25 percent in FY 2009. SSA continues to explore additional methods for increasing online services.
- SSA is redesigning the VIP system under the VIP Re-Write project. The redesigned VIP system will be Web-based, more user friendly, and provide improved management information. SSA plans to begin implementing the VIP Re-Write project in the spring of 2011.
- SSA is also piloting a video service delivery project in its field offices. With this project, field office staff will be able to interview customers in remote locations via video equipment. Additionally, video service delivery may enable SSA to redistribute workloads among field offices, reduce claims processing times, and improve field office efficiency, all of which may ultimately reduce visitor wait times.

³ Pub. L. No. 111-5, Division A, Title VIII, 123 STAT. 185-186. On February 17, 2009, the President signed ARRA into law. SSA received about \$1.09 billion in ARRA funds for program and operational purposes.

- SSA is replacing its telephone systems with VoiceOver Internet Protocol (VOIP) technology. SSA stated that VOIP should provide (1) the flexibility to route calls from busy sites to less active sites and (2) improved management information regarding the number, type, and duration of calls. Additionally, to better address the increasing number of calls to its teleservice centers, SSA hired about 260 additional teleservice staff in FY 2009 and plans to open a new center in Jackson, Tennessee, in 2011. Finally, SSA plans to add automated 800-number applications to better respond to customers' needs. For example, callers will be able to conduct a variety of transactions and listen to informational messages.
- To make more staff available for customer interviews and prevent the backlog of workloads, SSA implemented procedures for transferring workloads from busy field offices to less busy offices.
- SSA is also implementing the SMART program. SMART will provide for more efficient office space, which may help shorten visitor wait times.

Although we have not audited the effectiveness of these initiatives, we believe such efforts should result in shorter customer wait times. Further, we believe SSA should continue to explore other innovative methods to improve customer wait times.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER IMPROVEMENTS

We applaud the Agency for taking action to minimize field office visitor wait times. However, we encourage the Agency to take additional measures to ensure it maintains and further improves the timeliness in which it serves the public. Among these measures, we believe SSA should ensure its regions establish field office wait time performance measures and share best practices.

Customer Wait Time Goals

SSA officials with whom we spoke cited various limitations to establishing a "one size fits all" *national* wait time goal. We acknowledge these limitations but believe the Agency should, at a minimum, ensure its regions establish wait time goals and measures. We believe these measures should be challenging, yet feasible; clearly communicated to the field offices; and include more than just the average wait times for customers with and without appointments. We believe establishing such goals would provide clear and consistent guidance to field office employees and help identify offices that may need additional resources or other forms of assistance.

Our questionnaire asked whether each regional office established wait time goals for their field offices. Three regions responded that they had not established numerical wait time goals while two regions indicated they had specific wait time goals. Although the remaining five regions did not specifically state they had wait time goals, these regions had wait time performance standards or benchmarks. Overall, 7 of the 10 regions established a wait time goal, standard, or benchmark for their field offices.

Notwithstanding the terminology, the wait time goals ranged from 20 minutes to 45 minutes for visitors without appointments.

None of the regions, however, had goals pertaining to the number of visitors who wait more than a specified time, such as longer than 1 hour. Because *average* wait times may be tempered by many customers who wait only a few minutes, we believe performance measures should also address the percent of customers who wait longer than 1 hour to be seen. During our audit period, the average wait time for customers was generally less than 30 minutes. However, a large number of customers waited a long time for service. For example, of the 250 customers we interviewed during our field office visits, 24 (9.6 percent) waited more than 1 hour for service. We also believe the number of visitors who leave a field office without receiving service should be measured and monitored—as these occurrences also may indicate long wait times and customer dissatisfaction.

We acknowledge SSA encounters various challenges to providing timely service at its field offices. To meet these challenges, SSA has committed to various initiatives. We believe the success of these initiatives should reduce field office wait times while maintaining quality service. We stress the importance of SSA ensuring these initiatives are timely and successfully implemented.

Share Best Practices Among SSA Offices

Our questionnaire asked regional offices to provide us with their best practices for improving wait times. Based on the regional responses, it was evident that SSA explored innovative methods in developing best practices for shortening visitor wait times. Several of the best practices are discussed below.

- In May 2009, the New York Regional Commissioner developed written *Principles for Reducing Waiting Times* that she issued to her field office managers. The Regional Waiting Time Task Force developed 12 principles to better manage wait times. The principles covered such topics as optimal times to schedule interviews, proper use of VIP, when to open additional reception windows, how to categorize workloads, and the importance of management devoting time to observe reception areas.
- In the Boston Region, one area office implemented procedures to redirect telephone appointments from field offices with a high volume of walk-in visitors to other field offices where staff was available to perform interviews.
- Both the Atlanta and Dallas Regions created Websites to provide best practices to improve wait times. Field office managers can access the sites to find a list of best practices, frequently asked questions, helpful tips, useful resources, and other related information.

- In the Chicago Region, one area office piloted the VIP Reception Enhancement project. The project reviewed all aspects of the field office reception process. Specifically, a workgroup observed reception area practices in each area field office and compiled ideas for improvement. The ideas were shared with field office management and staff. Specific improvement actions were developed for each field office.
- The Denver Region established separate waiting areas for customers with Social Security number-related business in some of its field offices. The Region found that dedicating certain staff to these visitors improved overall service at these field offices.
- In the Seattle Region, the Northwest Regional Training Center developed a lesson to train staff on how to improve the interview process. Training center staff visit field offices and instruct staff on how to control interviews and promptly respond to customers' questions. The training also includes exercises where staff performs interviews and receive instructional feedback.

We acknowledge SSA's efforts to develop and implement best practices for improving visitor wait times. We believe sharing best practices is a valuable tool in helping an organization operate more efficiently. As such, we encourage SSA to track components' best practices for improving wait times and implement a process where the best practices are shared among all Regions and field offices.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SSA closely monitors field office wait times at the national, regional, and field office levels. However, although wait times improved during our audit period, we believe the number of field office visitors who experienced long wait times and left without service is significant. SSA faces various challenges to improving field office wait times. To meet these challenges, SSA has several initiatives, such as hiring and training staff, improving telephone infrastructure and online services, VIP redesign, video service delivery, transferring pending workloads, and redesigning field office workspace. We believe the success of these initiatives is critical to reducing wait times while maintaining quality service.

We recommend SSA:

1. Ensure regional offices establish performance goals that measure average customer wait times, percent of customers who wait over 1 hour, and percent of customers who leave without service. We believe these measures should be challenging, yet feasible, and based on the unique circumstances of each region.
2. Routinely evaluate the effectiveness of ongoing initiatives and, when necessary, take actions to ensure their success on a national level.

3. Develop a mechanism for regional and field offices to share best practices for reducing customer wait times and ensure that the mechanism is used.

AGENCY COMMENTS AND OIG RESPONSE

SSA agreed with Recommendations 2 and 3 but disagreed with Recommendation 1. In response to Recommendation 1, SSA stated it was not reasonable to establish a “one size fits all” field office wait time performance goal—even at the regional level. See Appendix E for the full text of SSA’s comments.

We continue to believe establishing performance goals would provide clear and consistent guidance to field office employees and help identify offices that may need additional resources or other forms of assistance. In fact, 7 of the 10 regions had wait time goals, standards, or benchmarks for their field offices. Our recommendation would simply formalize the establishment of such goals for all regions. As such, we encourage SSA to reconsider its response to this recommendation when developing its corrective action plan.



Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr.

Appendices

[APPENDIX A](#) – Acronyms

[APPENDIX B](#) – Scope and Methodology

[APPENDIX C](#) –Visitors Who Waited More Than 1 Hour

[APPENDIX D](#) – Regional Wait Time Data for the 21-Month Period August 2008 Through April 2010

[APPENDIX E](#) – Agency Comments

[APPENDIX F](#) – OIG Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

Acronyms

ARRA	<i>American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009</i>
FY	Fiscal Year
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
Pub. L. No.	Public Law Number
SMART	Space Modernization and Reception Transformation Service
SSA	Social Security Administration
VIP	Visitor Intake Process
VOIP	VoiceOver Internet Protocol

Scope and Methodology

To accomplish our objective, we distributed a questionnaire to each of the Social Security Administration's (SSA) 10 Regional Commissioners. We asked each Regional Commissioner to provide detailed answers to wait time-related questions. Specifically, the questionnaire solicited responses regarding Regional wait time goals and guidance, how wait times are monitored, and methods to improve wait times. We also asked the regions to explain why certain field offices had 3 or more months (during our analysis period) where 20 percent or more of their visitors waited more than 1 hour for service.

We initially obtained and analyzed 12 months of Visitor Intake Process (VIP) data for August 2008 through July 2009. However, during the October 2009 audit entrance conference, SSA requested that we also analyze August and September 2009 wait time data. Accordingly, we based our regional office questionnaire on 14 months of VIP data (August 2008 through September 2009). Finally, to present current and relevant data in this report, we obtained and analyzed current VIP data October 2009 through April 2010.

We also visited five field offices in the Atlanta Region and five field offices in the New York Region. At each of the offices visited, we interviewed management and staff and surveyed 25 visitors. In total, we surveyed 250 visitors to determine (1) their reasons for visiting the field office, (2) whether they had attempted to use SSA's online and telephone services, (3) how long they expected to wait at the field office, and (4) their satisfaction with the wait time and service.

Additionally, we interviewed staff from SSA's Office of Public Service and Operations Support to (1) gain an understanding of how VIP obtains and processes information and (2) determine how field office wait times are monitored.

The entities audited were SSA's 10 regional offices and the Office of the Deputy Commissioner for Operations, Office of Public Service and Operations Support. Our review of internal controls was limited to gaining an understanding of SSA's procedures for monitoring field office wait times. We conducted the audit between October 2009 and May 2010 in Atlanta, Georgia; Birmingham, Alabama; New York, New York; Jersey City, New Jersey; and Baltimore, Maryland. We conducted the audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Visitors Who Waited More Than 1 Hour

Month	Number of Visitors	Number of Visitors Who Waited over 1 Hour	Percentage of Visitors Who Waited over 1 Hour
August 2008	4,180,090	283,388	6.78%
September 2008	3,140,503	241,684	7.70%
October 2008	3,958,744	326,099	8.24%
November 2008	2,956,876	275,112	9.30%
December 2008	2,739,142	244,543	8.93%
January 2009	3,892,378	410,649	10.55%
February 2009	3,447,272	334,345	9.70%
March 2009	3,409,244	264,196	7.75%
April 2009	3,304,051	218,865	6.62%
May 2009	3,838,544	224,259	5.84%
June 2009	3,319,935	200,623	6.04%
July 2009	4,037,698	238,342	5.90%
August 2009	3,457,499	202,331	5.85%
September 2009	3,262,750	190,171	5.83%
October 2009	4,054,460	214,692	5.30%
November 2009	3,022,745	177,787	5.88%
December 2009	2,890,004	166,605	5.76%
January 2010	4,237,823	343,774	8.11%
February 2010	3,431,495	240,972	7.02%
March 2010	3,578,682	195,556	5.46%
April 2010	4,191,556	177,587	4.24%
Totals	74,351,491	5,171,580	6.96%

**Regional Wait Time Data for the 21-Month
Period August 2008 Through April 2010**

Region	Number of Field Offices	Number of Visitors	Average Wait Time (Minutes)	Number of Visitors Who Waited over 1 Hour	Percent of Visitors Who Waited over 1 Hour
Boston	72	3,247,257	17.8	150,427	4.63%
New York	126	8,199,205	29.5	1,101,126	13.43%
Philadelphia	141	6,242,028	20.6	391,692	6.28%
Atlanta	253	15,401,008	20.7	993,096	6.45%
Chicago	224	11,482,874	18.7	529,830	4.61%
Dallas	142	9,521,636	21.9	753,528	7.91%
Kansas City	74	2,881,138	9.7	18,770	0.65%
Denver	53	1,795,783	19.7	130,233	7.25%
San Francisco	163	12,926,197	22.7	1,032,684	7.99%
Seattle	53	2,654,365	16.3	70,194	2.64%
Totals	1301	74,351,491	19.8	5,171,580	6.96%

Agency Comments



SOCIAL SECURITY

MEMORANDUM

Date: October 7, 2010 **Refer To:** SIJ-3

To: Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr.
Inspector General

From: James A. Winn /s/
Executive Counselor to the Commissioner

Subject: Office of the Inspector General (OIG) Draft Report, "Customer Waiting Times in Social Security Administration Field Offices" (A-04-10-11034)--INFORMATION

Thank you for the opportunity to review the draft report. Attached is our response to the report recommendations.

Please let me know if we can be of further assistance. Please direct staff inquiries to Rebecca Tothero, Acting Director, Audit Management and Liaison Staff, at (410) 966-6975.

Attachment

COMMENTS ON THE OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL (OIG) DRAFT REPORT, “CUSTOMER WAITING TIMES IN THE SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION’S FIELD OFFICES” (A-04-10-11034)

Thank you for the opportunity to review the subject report. We appreciate your acknowledging our commitment to public service and the statement that you “applaud the Agency for taking action to minimize field office visitor wait times.”

RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

Ensure regional offices establish performance goals that measure average customer wait times, percent of customers who wait over 1 hour, and the percent of customers who leave without service. We believe these measures should be challenging, yet feasible, and based on the unique circumstances of each region.

Comment

We disagree. While we agree it is important to monitor and improve field office (FO) wait times, we do not agree it is wise to establish specific performance goals. Our FO managers balance the need to provide service to customers who contact us by telephone with those who choose to come to our FOs. We must continue to emphasize both service channels so as not to disrupt this delicate balance. Our experience indicates that when we do not answer the telephones in FOs, the walk in traffic increases. Even at a regional level, we do not believe there is a reasonable “one size fits all” waiting time goal.

As your report indicates, we have been focusing on reducing customer wait times. In FY 2009, about 7.2 percent of our visitors left without service, compared to FY 2010 (based on information through July 2010) of about 5.7 percent. While we acknowledge that some of the visitors to our FOs leave without service, it is difficult to quantify how many of those we can attribute to long wait times. It is important to note that visitors may leave without service because of our new service delivery tool, Social Security Television (SSTV). Our SSTV technology educates visitors on what information or evidence they need for their visit to a FO. For example, after viewing SSTV, a visitor may realize he does not have the proper documentation to obtain a replacement Social Security number card. The customer may leave the FO without service and return later with the proper documentation.

We also acknowledge that Visitor Intake Process (VIP) data may be skewed. Customers or children sometimes push buttons on the kiosk, and there have been situations where VIP produced multiple tickets for the same customer.

These are just some of the issues that make it undesirable for us to establish hard and fast performance goals. Nevertheless, we will continue our efforts to lessen customer wait times and reduce the number of customers who leave without service.

Recommendation 2

Routinely evaluate the effectiveness of ongoing initiatives and, when necessary, take actions to ensure their success on a national level.

Comment

We agree. This is our current practice. We will continue to evaluate the effectiveness of on-going initiatives and take any necessary actions to ensure their success on the national level.

Recommendation 3

Develop a mechanism for regional and field offices to share best practices for reducing customer wait times and ensure that the mechanism is used.

Comment

We agree. This is our current practice. We will continue to monitor regional and field office best practices for reducing customer wait times. When we determine a practice has proven successful at the region level, we will consider if there is a broader applicability to adopt the practice nationally.

OIG Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

OIG Contacts

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Frank Nagy, Audit Manager

Acknowledgments

In addition to those named above:

Mike Leibrecht, Senior Auditor

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