

Field Office Closures in the Philadelphia Region

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September 2018

Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To address concerns from Representatives Donald S. Beyer, Jr., and Elijah E. Cummings regarding the closing of Social Security Administration (SSA) field offices in Arlington, Virginia, and Baltimore North, Maryland. We evaluated SSA's (1) reasons for the field office closures, (2) plans to mitigate any effects on individuals currently served by the field offices, and (3) adherence to its internal policies related to congressional and public notification of the office closures.

Background

Periodically, SSA reviews its field offices to ensure service delivery is consistent with the needs of the area. Policy requires that SSA notify Congress and other stakeholders about significant service delivery changes after the change is approved by the Deputy Commissioner for Operations. The policy states that the SSA regional office should discuss significant service delivery changes with affected Senators and Representatives or a staff member representing that individual. The policy instructs SSA to hold discussions with all other parties who may have a stake in the proposed changes, such as community leaders.

Conclusions

In June 2018, SSA closed the Arlington, Virginia, and Baltimore North, Maryland, field offices because the leases had expired, the lessors would not renew the leases, and the General Services Administration (GSA) could not locate suitable replacement space. As a result, the Regional Commissioner proposed to close both field offices and consolidate its employees with neighboring offices that support the existing service areas.

The proximity of field offices near the Arlington and Baltimore North field offices should help mitigate any of the closure's negative effects. Within a 17-mile radius of both field offices, there are five field offices near the now closed Arlington field office and seven near the now closed Baltimore North field office. The nearby locations will provide designated areas to service customers, a larger staff, and continued accessibility to public transportation for customers.

SSA's policy requires that the Regional Commissioner notify congressional and other stakeholders of the Arlington and Baltimore North field offices' closure. However, the policy does not contain specific timeframes for the notifications. However, SSA does provide guidance to its regional offices on the suggested timeframes for these notifications. The SSA guidance states that notifications must be made at least 90 days before the date of the consolidation except in extenuating circumstances, such as critical health, safety, space, and renovation issues. SSA first notified the affected congressional officials of the Arlington field office closure on March 6, 2018—about 107 days before the closure and Baltimore North field office closure on March 6 and 7, 2018—about 107 or 108 days before the closure. SSA also notified various stakeholders for both field offices, such as local community leaders, between 30 and 106 days before the closure.

In response to our draft report, SSA stated it continues to evaluate its field office consolidation policy and will make updates, where necessary, to ensure consistent regional business processes.