Objective

To assess workload increases in program service centers (PSC) from Fiscal Years (FY) 2013 to 2016.

Background

PSCs are responsible for paying Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance (OASDI) benefits, administering the Medicare program, and handling a variety of other functions essential to maintaining beneficiary records. The Social Security Administration (SSA) maintains eight processing centers nationwide: six process similar workloads while the remaining two handle specialized workloads. PSCs 1 through 6 play a key role in serving approximately 60 million OASDI beneficiaries and handling items referred from approximately 1,230 field offices, about 170 hearing offices, National Hearing Centers, the Appeals Council, and telephone service centers as well as those generated by automated computer operations. PSCs handle such tasks as awarding and adjusting benefits, issuing payments, updating records, and resolving complex issues.

Each year, the Deputy Commissioner for Operations establishes an operating plan that defines operating priorities at PSCs, field offices, and hearing offices in the form of Public Service Indicators based on the public's changing needs and the challenges SSA faces.

Findings

The combined volume of all pending workload items at PSCs 1 through 6 more than tripled, from approximately 1.1 million at the beginning of FY 2013 to about 3.5 million by the end of FY 2016. Work receipts and staffing were among the factors that accounted for the growth in PSC pending workloads. Work receipts increased 18 percent from about 16 million in FY 2013 to over 19 million in FY 2016. Additionally, the PSCs' ability to hire employees was limited because of budget constraints.

From FY 2013 to the end of FY 2016, core technical staff at PSCs 1 through 6 declined by 7 percent. In addition, because of a large influx of new employees at the beginning of FY 2015, the proportion of experienced to new technicians fell significantly. Further, training and mentoring new employees required extensive resources, which reduced the number of experienced staff available to process work and contributed to the increase in pending workload items during the audit period.

These new hires completed their extensive training while PSC workloads were experiencing the largest growth. As such, we found the increase in pending workload items resulted not only from the growth in work receipts and a reduction of staff but also from the sharp decline in overall staff experience.

Recommendation

We recommend SSA develop a plan to address the backlog of pending PSC workload items.

SSA agreed with our recommendation.