

Milwaukee Social Security Administration Field Office Closure

A-05-18-50671



July 2018

Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To answer questions from Representative Gwen Moore regarding the March 22, 2018 closing of the Mitchell Street Social Security Administration (SSA) field office in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. For our review, we provide information on SSA's (1) reasons for the field office closure, (2) plans to mitigate any effects on individuals served by the field office, and (3) adherence to its internal policies related to congressional and public notification of the office closure.

Background

SSA policy requires that SSA notify Congress and other stakeholders about significant service delivery changes, such as a field office closing after the Deputy Commissioner of Operations approves the closure. The policy states that the SSA regional office should hold discussions about any significant service delivery changes with affected Senators and Representatives as well as their respective staff members. The policy also instructs SSA to hold discussions with all other parties who may have a stake in the proposed changes, such as community leaders.

Conclusions

In October 2015, SSA decided to relocate the Mitchell Street field office based on ongoing safety concerns and unresolved building maintenance issues. Accordingly, in December 2015, the General Services Administration (GSA) started a lease-relocation project to search for a new SSA field office site in the area the Mitchell Street field office served. However, in January 2017, GSA notified SSA it could not secure a viable location that would meet space requirements. In January 2018, the Regional Commissioner decided to close the Mitchell Street field office and consolidate its employees in the other Milwaukee-area field offices.

SSA stated the four other Milwaukee-area field offices near the closed Mitchell Street field office would help mitigate any negative effects of the closure. These other field offices had bilingual staff and interpreter services to assist the Spanish-speaking clients formerly served by the Mitchell Street field office.

SSA policy requires that the SSA Regional Office notify congressional and other stakeholders of field office closures. 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. According to SSA, the significant nature of the health and safety incidents in the Mitchell Street field office, in addition to GSA's inability to secure alternative space, were the extenuating circumstances that expedited the decision to consolidate the office. As such, SSA first notified the affected congressional officials of the Mitchell Street field office closure on January 9 and 10, 2018—about 70 days before the closure. SSA also notified 40 stakeholders, such as local community leaders, between January 10 and March 13, 2018—between 9 and 71 days before the closure.

In response to our draft report, SSA stated it is reviewing the field office consolidation policy and regional business processes to ensure consistency and identify areas for improvement. Additionally, in the future, if GSA needs to expand its search area for a given relocation, SSA stated it will inform the local congressional delegation when it encounters difficulties finding space for office relocation.