

The Social Security Administration's Telephone Services During June 2020

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To review the Social Security Administration's (SSA) telephone services during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically during June 2020.

Background

On July 21, 2020, Representative John Larson, Chair, and Tom Reed, Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Social Security, requested the Office of the Inspector General review SSA's telephone services during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this report, we address SSA's telephone services for June 2020.

We obtained the Agency's telephone performance metrics and customer service information for the national 800-number and field offices for June 2020. We compared these metrics to pre-pandemic performance, specifically to June 2019. We also obtained information on changes in staffing and workloads SSA made during the COVID-19 pandemic and evaluated their effect on telephone performance metrics and customer service. Finally, we determined how SSA's performance on these metrics compared to other Federal agencies and industry during June 2019 and 2020. We did not independently verify the reliability of the data SSA provided.

Findings

In June 2020, SSA's field offices and national 800-number received 30 percent more calls than June 2019, with field offices receiving most of the additional calls. Also, during the same periods,

- calls to the field offices and the national 800-number during business hours resulted in fewer busy messages, though the business hours for the national 800-number were reduced in June 2020,
- the number of callers who hung up without speaking to an employee during business hours was lower for the field offices but slightly higher for the national 800-number,
- the number of calls handled by employees was much higher for calls to the field offices but remained about the same for calls to the national 800-number, and
- callers to field offices waited less time for service while callers to the 800-number waited longer.

SSA altered operations because of the COVID-19 pandemic to continue serving the public through its telephone operations. SSA equipped employees with necessary technology to answer the increasing number of calls while teleworking. SSA also shared field office general telephone numbers not previously available so the public could contact employees at the local level for service during business hours. While SSA reduced the amount of callers receiving a busy message, this was partially enabled by reducing hours for the national 800-number. Further, there was no measure of customer feedback since the Agency did not use post-call surveys for field office calls and turned off this feature for the national 800-number. SSA has not returned to pre-pandemic operating hours for the national 800-number.

In general, SSA's telephone services performance during June 2020 was similar to 13 customer service call centers we reviewed from 10 other Federal agencies, as compared to June 2019, but SSA's performance seemed to fare better during COVID-19 than industry call centers.

In response to our draft report, SSA stated it would continue ensuring employees have the tools they need to improve service to the public.