

The Social Security Administration's Field Office Benefit Verification Process

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objectives

To determine (1) specific strategies the Social Security Administration's (SSA) national, regional, and local field offices (FO) had pursued to reduce the number of benefit verification (BEVE) letters individuals requested at FOs, including any effect of such strategies; (2) how SSA used its data exchanges to provide this information directly to agencies/States; and (3) the number of BEVE requests by office and region as well as over time.

Background

In a May 1, 2014 letter, the Ranking Member of the House Subcommittee on Social Security, Committee on Ways and Means, asked us to evaluate SSA's past efforts to reduce the number of BEVE requests made by individuals at FOs and/or reduce the impact that responding to these requests has had on FO workloads.

SSA's BEVE letter is proof that an individual receives Social Security benefits, Supplemental Security Income, or Medicare. Individuals may obtain these letters via SSA's FO, national 800-number, or Website. SSA's data exchanges provide governments, businesses, and private organizations access to information they need to provide services to their and SSA's mutual customers.

Our Findings

SSA's primary strategy to reduce the number of FO-issued BEVEs was its national outreach program. Over the last 15 years, SSA has developed and enhanced other service-delivery channels to reduce the number of calls or visits to local FOs. As part of SSA's national outreach, FOs, with regional coordination, promoted and encouraged the public to use the Agency's optional service channels to conduct SSA business, including requesting BEVE letters. In December 2013, when SSA decided to discontinue FO-issued BEVE letters, SSA began notifying the public about the planned service change. However, in July 2014, SSA reversed its decision to discontinue the service.

SSA did not use type-of-claimant and age data to direct its BEVE outreach. Instead, SSA used employee and visitor anecdotal information to identify those organizations that sent individuals to FOs for BEVE letters. SSA told us it did not have specific data that showed a direct relationship between its outreach efforts and a change in the number of BEVE requests among its various service channels. SSA further stated it had not conducted a pilot study to determine the impact of the planned discontinuance of the BEVE service at FOs. However, SSA told us it had experienced the effect of limiting this service during the Government shutdown in 2013 and did not identify any major issues. SSA expected, in the long-term, the service change would have allowed it to annually redirect approximately 90 work years of staff time and resources to its core mission work.

All States have electronic access to BEVE data through SSA's data exchanges. SSA acknowledges that technical and cost limitations prevent some States from fully using the exchanges. SSA believes its continued outreach efforts and special workload studies will identify partners that could make better use of its data exchanges and may ultimately reduce FO workloads.

Since Fiscal Year 2011, over 40 million individuals have visited SSA FOs each year. Approximately 5 million (12.5 percent) of these visitors requested a BEVE letter. Since SSA expanded its online service in 2013, individuals have steadily increased their use of this service to request BEVEs. To date, more individuals have chosen to obtain a BEVE letter at an FO.