

Examining Social Security's Service to the Public

Preface to a Series

Social Security Advisory Board

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As part of its statutory responsibility to examine the quality and accessibility of SSA's service to the public and its obligation to make recommendations on how to improve those services, the Board is preparing a series of work on SSA's service to the public. This preface provides context for that series and is followed by the first paper.

SSA administers Social Security and Supplemental Security Income (SSI).¹ Social Security consists of old-age and survivors insurance (OASI), and disability insurance (DI). These programs serve people with significant connection to the labor force. They provide benefits based on past earnings. SSI provides means-tested payments to people who are age 65 or older, blind, or with a disability. Nearly 69 million people receive checks each month under these two programs.²

People interact with SSA to gather information, to apply for benefits, to correct administrative mistakes, and for many other reasons.³ The need for contact may be especially important for those accessing SSA's DI benefits and means-tested SSI payments, which entail more complex processes than do OASI.⁴ The public can access SSA's services through three channels: in person at field offices, over-the-phone through local field office staff or over the national 800 number, and online.⁵

¹ SSA's key tasks among many include maintaining earnings information, making eligibility determinations for payments, administering appeals for those who disagree with its benefit decisions, revising payment amounts as beneficiary circumstances change, issuing Social Security numbers and replacement cards, providing benefit verification statements, and enrolling contributors into Medicare. SSA also supports other programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance and Railroad Retirement Benefits, and answers questions from the public about revenues transferred from the Treasury Department to the Social Security OASI, and DI Trusts. Government Accountability Office. 2013. GAO-13-459, "[SSA: Long-Term Strategy Needed to Address Key Management Challenges](#)," (May), 6-7.

² 61.3 million people receive benefits under Title II of the Social Security Act, OASI and DI; 5.4 million people receive payments under Title XVI, SSI; an additional 2.7 million people receive both. Social Security Administration. 2020. "[Monthly Statistical Snapshot, February 2020](#)." (March 16), distributed by SSA.gov.

³ An individual must learn about program eligibility, provide required information, and manage administrative interactions and processes. Herd, Pamela, and Donald P. Moynihan. 2018. [Administrative Burden: Policymaking by Other Means](#). New York City: Russel Sage Foundation, Table 1.1.

⁴ Government Accountability Office. 1986. GAO-86-71BR, "[Issues Relating to Agency Field Offices](#)," (March), 6.

⁵ The proposed series of papers will focus on these channels. In addition, SSA's processing centers handle complex claims and provide support to the 800 number and field offices; state agencies and

SSA is charged both with routine delivery of many public services and responding to workloads that fluctuate with economic and demographic conditions, natural disasters, evolving technology and preferences of workers and customers.⁶ For example, since mid-March 2020, SSA has temporarily closed its field offices to the public because of the COVID-19 emergency. SSA is also focusing its efforts on prioritizing payment-based workloads over program integrity work.⁷

Congress also affects SSA's program administration through its authorizing and appropriating laws. In addition, Congressional hearings and routine oversight and inquiry may affect agency operations and policymaking. SSA must adjust to fluctuations in funding levels to run its operations. The agency must also comply with requirements of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).⁸ In 2018, for example, OMB released new guidance to high-impact service providers, including SSA, requiring each agency to develop and operationalize customer experience measures in seven domains: satisfaction, trust, effectiveness, simplicity, speed, transparency, and employee helpfulness.^{9,10}

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) and the SSA Office of the Inspector General (OIG) provide oversight to SSA that sometimes recommends administrative

some federal components make initial and reconsideration disability determinations; the Office of Hearing Operations handles requests for a hearing, and the Appeals Council handles appeals. Government Accountability Office. 2017. GAO-17-597, "[Improvements Needed in Facilities Planning and Service Delivery Evaluation](#)," (July) 3-4; Social Security Administration, 2019. "[Annual Performance Report FY 2018 – FY 2020](#)" (March), 5.

⁶ Social Security Administration. 2018. "[Agency Strategic Plan FY 2018 – FY 2022](#)" (February 12), Appendix 1.

⁷ Neal, Richard E., Kevin Brady, John B. Larson, Tom Reed, Danny K. Davis, and Jackie Walorski. 2020. [Letter, Reps. Richard E. Neal, Kevin Brady, Committee on Ways and Means, Reps. John B. Larson, Tom Reed, Subcommittee on Social Security, and Reps. Danny K. Davis, Jacki Walorski, Subcommittee on Worker and Family Support to Andrew Saul, Commissioner, Social Security Administration.](#)

⁸ Government Accountability Office. 1993. GAO-94-22, "[Social Security: Sustained effort needed to improve management and prepare for the future](#)," (October), 13.

⁹ Office of Management and Budget. 2019. A-11, Section 280, "[Managing Customer Experience and Improving Service Delivery](#)."

¹⁰ There is a growing recognition that a better customer experience delivers measurable impact across multiple priorities. D'Emidio, Tony, Sarah Greenberg, Kevin Heindenreich, Julia Klier, Jonah Wagner, and Thomas Weber. 2019. "[The global case for customer experience in government](#)." McKinsey and Company, September.

changes. For example, both GAO and OIG recently issued reports identifying insufficient staffing, outdated information technology, and deteriorating physical infrastructure as issues that hinder service quality.¹¹

SSA is now expanding the use of remote services, including video teleconferencing, online real-time assistance, online Social Security card replacements, benefit verification letters, and *my Social Security* enhancements, in its effort to achieve the agency's first strategic goal: effective service delivery.¹² Concurrently, SSA phased out the provision of Social Security Number printouts in field offices in December 2014 and conducted a national outreach program to reduce the number of calls and visits to field offices by encouraging only online or phone access to benefit verification letters.^{13,14} Although these changes have resulted in an increase in the use of SSA's online services over the last decade, the agency has not seen a corresponding decrease in the volume of in-person field office visits. In fact, this number has remained relatively stable as the number of in-person visits was about the same in 2019 (43.2 million) as during 2007 (42.9 million) (see Figure 1).¹⁵

¹¹ GAO 2013; Office of the Inspector General, Social Security Administration. 2018. A-02-18-50307, "[FY 2018 Inspector General's Statement on SSA's Major Management and Performance Challenges](#)," (November).

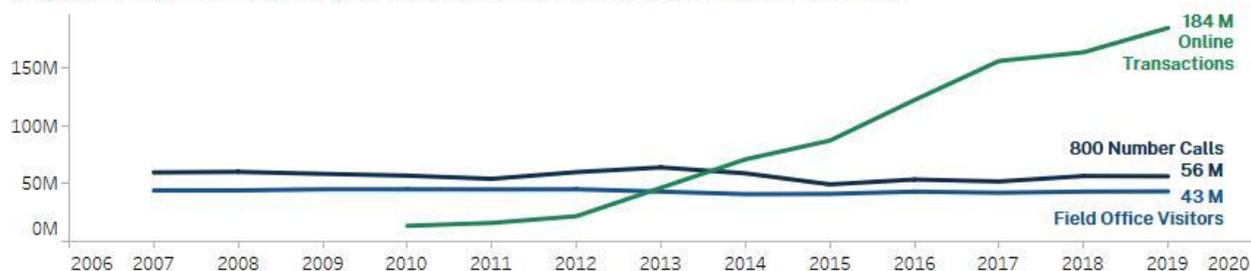
¹² SSA 2018, 4, 6; SSA 2019b, 7-13.

¹³ Office of the Inspector General, Social Security Administration. 2014. A-01-14-14039, "[The Social Security Administration's Reduction in Field Office Operating Hours](#)," (August).

¹⁴ Initially, SSA decided to phase out the provision of benefit verification letters in field offices, but the agency reversed the decision. OIG 2014.

¹⁵ From 2006 to 2010, the number of field office visits increased until 2015, before declining. In 2016, visits increased, and then remained relatively flat until a recent increase in 2019. Social Security Administration. 2019b. "[Field Office Visitors \(Average Daily\)](#)" (November 7), distributed by SSA.gov.

Figure 1: Use of SSA Service Channels, Fiscal Years 2007 to 2019



Notes: Figure begins in 2007 due to data availability. Each online transaction is counted independently, whereas each field office visit or 800 number call is counted once, regardless of the number of transactions. According to the *Annual Performance Report 2014-2016*, online transactions include: *mySocialSecurity* suite services, pre-entitlement informational services (excluding visits to Social Security Online, Frequently Asked Questions, and Field Office Locator), entitlement claims, entitlement appeals, and post-entitlement transactions. **Source:** SSA, *Agency Financial Report (2008-2019)*. SSA, *Overall Satisfaction Rates Report (2007)*. SSA, *Data for National 800 Number Network Call Volume & Agent Busy Rate (2007-2019)*.



The relative stability in the volume of field office visits may reflect several offsetting factors. The growth and aging of the population that SSA serves tends to increase field office visits, especially by those unable to access online services. Increased online use likely prevented a substantial increase in field office visits between 2009 and 2016, as the population increased seven percent and overall demand for retirement and related benefits increased 20 percent.¹⁶ Tightened identity authentication procedures after instances of online fraud may have also tempered growth of online service by discouraging online usage or requiring additional field office visits for identity verification.

As demand for SSA services will likely continue increasing as the population ages¹⁷, SSA must evaluate and appropriately provide quality and accessible service in field offices, over-the-phone and through online channels. SSA should examine how to provide services to various population groups given differential abilities to replace in-person field office visits with other service channels.

The Board believes that it is imperative for SSA to use evidence-based measures to evaluate access to agency services. OMB released guidance in July 2019 on how to implement the first phase of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018. The Act directs SSA to develop internal evidence-building plans, establish a

¹⁶ GAO 2017, 12 and 17; Michael Astrue. 2010. *Oversight Hearing on Social Security Administration Field Office Service Delivery: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Social Security of the House Committee on Ways & Means, 113th Cong. (April 15) (statement of Michael Astrue, Commissioner of Social Security Administration).*

¹⁷ GAO 2017, 17-18.

chief evaluation officer, and periodically report on the use of evidence in day-to-day operations.¹⁸

The new Commissioner of Social Security stated that he “took the job because SSA must dramatically improve customer service”.¹⁹ The Board urges the Commissioner of Social Security to initiate a data-driven approach to monitoring service delivery across its service channels.²⁰ To make more decisions based on evidence, the Board encourages SSA to make increased use of data, provide strong privacy protections, and increase transparency of operational processes²¹, as a way to improve customer service quality. SSA should also engage the public when evaluating changes to service delivery because transparency and outside input result in better public service by providing greater review of evidence about outcomes of different choices.²² If SSA provides this rigorous analysis more transparently, the policymaking community may better distinguish whether SSA’s administrative budgets are inadequate, SSA’s use of the provided funds is poor, or both.

The Board is committed to supporting the Commissioner, as well as Congress and OMB, in the advancement of these efforts.

¹⁸ Vought, Russel T. 2019. Office of Management and Budget, Memorandum M-19-23, “[Phase 1 Implementation of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018: Learning Agendas, Personnel, and Planning Guidance](#)” July 10; Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018, [Pub. L. No. 115-435](#), 132 Stat. 5529; 5 U.S.C. § 101 (2019).

¹⁹ Social Security Administration. 2019c. Social Security Administration Press Office, “[A Message about Improving Service from Andrew Saul, Commissioner of Social Security](#)” (November 4).

²⁰ Government Accountability Office. 2018. GAO-18-432T, “[Continuing Leadership Focus Needed to Modernize How SSA Does Business](#),” (March 7), 8-11.

²¹ Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking. 2017. “[The Promise of Evidence-Based Policymaking](#),” (September); Evidence-Based Policymaking Commission Act 2018.

²² Herd and Moynihan 2018.

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