

OIG

Office *of the* Inspector General

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Audit Report

Customer Wait Times in the Social
Security Administration's Field
Offices

A-04-18-50260 | February 2018

OIG Office of the Inspector General
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

MEMORANDUM

Date: February 6, 2018

Refer To:

To: The Commissioner

From: Acting Inspector General

Subject: Customer Wait Times in the Social Security Administration's Field Offices (A-04-18-50260)

The attached final report presents the results of the Office of Audit's review. The objectives were to assess (1) factors that affect customer wait times at the Social Security Administration's field offices and (2) initiatives the Agency has taken to improve customer wait times.

Please provide within 60 days a corrective action plan that addresses each recommendation. If you wish to discuss the final report, please call me or have your staff contact Rona Lawson, Assistant Inspector General for Audit, 410-965-9700.



Gale Stallworth Stone

Attachment

cc:
General Counsel

Customer Wait Times in the Social Security Administration's Field Offices

A-04-18-50260



February 2018

Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To assess (1) factors that affect customer wait times at the Social Security Administration's (SSA) field offices and (2) initiatives the Agency has taken to improve customer wait times.

Background

SSA administers its programs and operations through a network of approximately 1,220 field offices in 10 regions that serve the public throughout the United States and its territories. Field offices are SSA's primary point of face-to-face contact with the public. In Fiscal Year 2016, SSA field offices served 43.5 million visitors.

SSA's Visitor Intake Process Re-write (VIPr) collects information about office visitors and appointments and provides management information for area, regional, and national reports. This information provides a picture of visitors and reception activities that helps field offices analyze the effectiveness of their customer service. The Area Director and Regional Commissioner Offices monitor wait times at field offices in their areas and take measures to address issues, as appropriate, while the Office of the Deputy Commissioner for Operations receives monthly briefings on field office wait times.

Findings

In addition to the high volume of visitors, factors that affect field office wait times include complex workloads, staffing issues, and shortened public operating hours. To improve customer wait times at field offices, SSA uses such strategies as promoting eServices; providing self-help personal computers in field offices; using Workload Support Unit (WSU) capacity to assist the busiest field offices; using Video Service Delivery (VSD) and work sharing; approving overtime; and sharing best practices among field offices.

Although SSA monitors field office wait times at the national, regional, and field office levels and uses many strategies to manage field office workloads, it still faces challenges in improving its level of service and needs to continue being proactive in managing wait times. To assist in meeting customer needs, the Agency should consider using technology, such as VIPr, to monitor customer wait times at the national level in real-time. Doing so, would allow the Agency to expand its work-sharing program by transferring mobile workloads, based on Agency priorities, on a real-time basis. In addition, to ensure its customer service strategies are reducing wait times, SSA should periodically measure their effectiveness, where possible.

Recommendations

We recommended that SSA:

1. Determine the feasibility of using technology, at an enterprise-wide level, to identify high-stress offices and transfer eligible workloads, based on Agency priorities, on a real-time basis.
2. Periodically track the use and effectiveness of ongoing initiatives and tools used to monitor and reduce visitor wait times, where possible.

SSA disagreed with our recommendations.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| Objective | 1 |
| Background | 1 |
| Results of Review | 2 |
| Factors that Affect Wait Times at Field Offices | 3 |
| Field Office Visitors and Workloads | 3 |
| Staffing and Operating Hours | 4 |
| SSA Strategies to Improve Wait Times | 6 |
| SSA Express Initiative – eServices and SHPC | 6 |
| WSUs | 7 |
| VSD and Work Sharing | 8 |
| Overtime | 9 |
| Best Practices | 9 |
| Conclusions | 10 |
| Recommendations | 10 |
| Agency Comments and OIG Response | 10 |
| Appendix A – Scope and Methodology | A-1 |
| Appendix B – Field Offices with Consistently Long Wait Times | B-1 |
| Appendix C – Agency Comments | C-1 |

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|------|---|
| CSR | Customer Service Representative |
| FY | Fiscal Year |
| OIG | Office of the Inspector General |
| RSHI | Retirement, Survivors, Health Insurance |
| SHPC | Self-Help Personal Computer |
| SSA | Social Security Administration |
| VIPr | Visitor Intake Process Re-write |
| VSD | Video Service Delivery |
| WSU | Workload Support Unit |

OBJECTIVE

Our objectives were to assess (1) factors that affect customer wait times at the Social Security Administration's (SSA) field offices and (2) initiatives the Agency has taken to improve customer wait times.

BACKGROUND

SSA administers its programs and services through a network of approximately 1,220 field offices in 10 regions that serve the public throughout the United States and its territories. Field offices are SSA's primary point of face-to-face contact with the public. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2016, SSA field offices served approximately 43.5 million visitors.

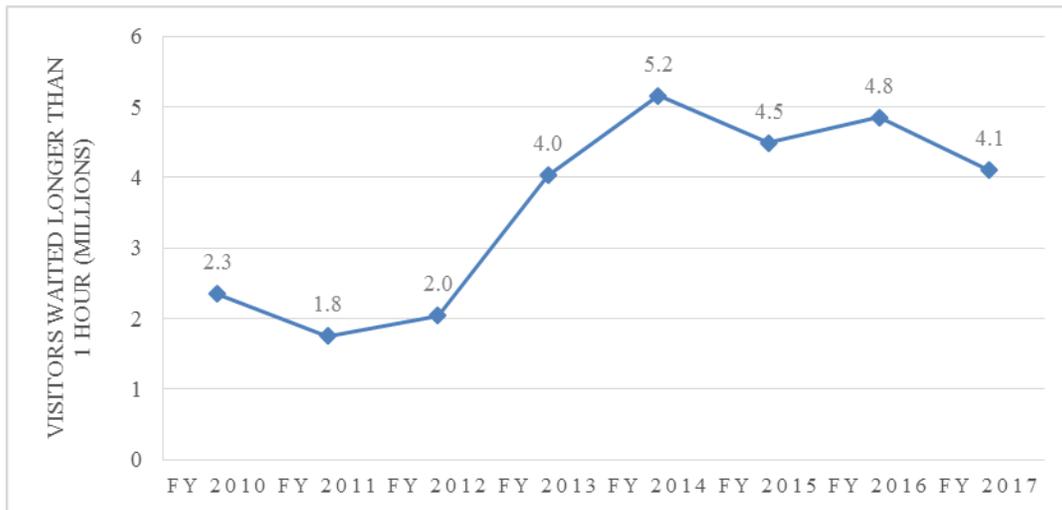
SSA's Visitor Intake Process Re-write (VIPr) collects information about office visitors and appointments and provides management information for area, regional, and national reports. This information provides a picture of visitors and reception activities that helps field offices analyze the effectiveness of their customer service. The Area Director and Regional Commissioner Offices monitor wait times at field offices in their areas and take measures to address issues, as appropriate. The Office of the Deputy Commissioner for Operations receives monthly briefings on field office wait times.

Since FY 2010, customer wait times have increased in all 10 SSA regions. The average wait time for all visitors (with and without appointments) increased about 42 percent from 19 minutes in FY 2010 to 27 minutes in FY 2016; however, SSA told us the average wait time decreased to 24.9 minutes in FY 2017.

In October 2010,¹ we reported that about 7 percent of all field office visitors from August 2008 through April 2010 waited longer than 1 hour for service in an SSA field office. Since FY 2010, the number of field office visitors who waited longer than 1 hour for service increased 109 percent from 2.3 million in FY 2010 to 4.8 million in FY 2016 (see Figure 1). This means that about one of every nine visitors waited longer than 1 hour for service in FY 2016. However, SSA told us the number of visitors who waited longer than 1 hour for service decreased to 4.1 million in FY 2017.

¹ SSA, OIG, *Customer Waiting Times in the Social Security Administration's Field Offices*, A-04-10-11034, (October 2010).

Figure 1: Total Field Office Visitors Who Waited Longer Than 1 Hour for Service (In Millions)



Note: Source: SSA’s Office of Operations

In some instances, field office visitors waited for extended lengths of time to receive service. In FY 2016, over 22,000 visitors (about 0.5 percent) waited longer than 4 hours for service. Of those visitors, SSA’s records showed that over 1,000 visitors waited longer than 6 hours, and 126 visitors waited longer than 7 hours. SSA told us it was not aware of any visitors that waited for these extended periods; however, SSA stated the reason could be technician error in VIPr.

For this review, we obtained field office wait times for FYs 2010 through 2016² and discussed with SSA factors that affect field office wait times and strategies it used to manage wait times. We also interviewed management staff at 14 selected field offices (10 with high wait times and 4 with low wait times). The full scope and methodology is in Appendix A.

RESULTS OF REVIEW

In addition to the high volume of visitors, factors that affect field office wait times include complex workloads, staffing issues, and shortened public operating hours. To improve customer wait times at field offices, SSA uses such strategies as promoting eServices; providing self-help personal computers (SHPC) in field offices; using Workload Support Unit (WSU) capacity to assist the busiest field offices; using Video Service Delivery (VSD) and work sharing; approving overtime; and sharing best practices among field offices.

² This report continues the analysis of wait times referenced in our prior report, *Customer Waiting Times in the Social Security Administration’s Field Offices*, A-04-17-50216, (December 2016). At the end of our audit, SSA provided us with FY 2017 wait time totals and averages.

Although SSA monitors field office wait times at the national, regional, and field office levels and uses many strategies to manage field office workloads, it still faces challenges in improving its level of service and needs to continue being proactive in managing wait times. To assist in meeting customer needs, the Agency should consider using technology, such as VIPr, to monitor customer wait times at the national level in real-time. Doing so would allow the Agency to expand its work-sharing program by transferring mobile workloads, based on Agency priorities, on a real-time basis. In addition, to ensure its customer service strategies are reducing wait times, SSA should periodically measure their effectiveness, where possible.

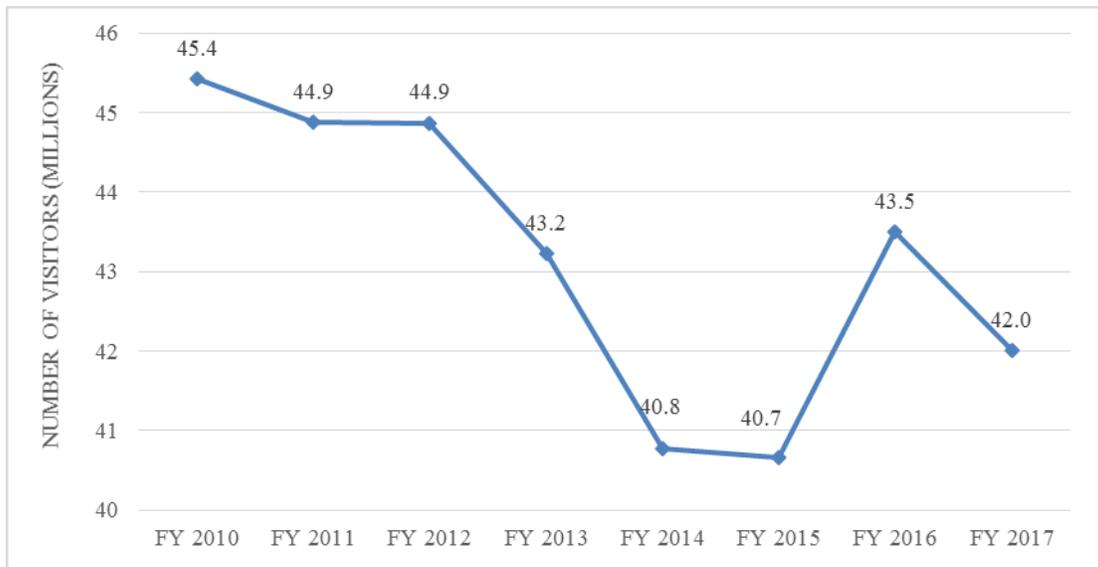
Factors that Affect Wait Times at Field Offices

In addition to the volume of visitors annually to its field offices, SSA faces challenges in delivering quality services because of its complex workloads, staffing issues, and shortened public operating hours.

Field Office Visitors and Workloads

Each year, SSA serves more than 40 million customers, as shown in Figure 2. During FYs 2010 through 2015, the total number of visitors to all SSA field offices steadily decreased, but the number increased in FY 2016 and then decreased again in FY 2017.

**Figure 2: Total Field Office Visitors
(In Millions)**



Note: Source: SSA’s Office of Operations

SSA has complex workloads. For example, to serve its 43.5 million visitors in FY 2016, SSA reported it

- processed about 17 million original or replacement Social Security number applications;³
- received about 7 million applications for Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance benefits and about 2 million applications for Supplemental Security Income payments;⁴
- conducted over 850,000 full medical continuing disability reviews and about 2.5 million Supplemental Security Income redeterminations to ensure payment accuracy; and
- performed other functions, such as updating about 20 million beneficiary records and answering telephone calls.⁵

SSA told us it takes an SSA employee, on average, 17 minutes to process Social Security number applications; 130 minutes for disability claims; 79 minutes for Retirement, Survivors, Health Insurance (RSHI) claims; 91 minutes for Supplemental Security Income aged claims; and 101 minutes for Supplemental Security Income blind and disabled claims. In addition, SSA told us it takes 6 minutes, on average, to process status changes.

Wait Times for Visitors with and Without an Appointment

About 3 million (7 percent) of the 43.5 million visitors to SSA's field offices in FY 2016 had scheduled an appointment before their visit. Visitors who scheduled an appointment waited an average of 4 minutes, while visitors who did not have an appointment waited an average of 28 minutes.⁶

In most cases, making an appointment did reduce a customer's wait time. However, in FY 2016, approximately 32,000 visitors (about 1 percent) who had appointments waited longer than 1 hour for service. Of those, SSA records showed that over 200 visitors who had appointments waited longer than 4 hours. SSA stated wait times longer than 4 hours were likely due to technician errors in VIPr.

Staffing and Operating Hours

Staffing levels significantly affect the services SSA provides the American public. In FYs 2011 through 2013, SSA experienced a 3-year hiring freeze because of lower-than-requested funding levels. During this time, field offices lost 2,973 employees—from 29,114 in FY 2010 to 26,141 in FY 2013. SSA stated this reduction resulted in more than just fewer employees; it was a significant loss of institutional knowledge and experience. In addition, new employees must

³ Of these 17 million applications, about 100,000 replacement cards were processed online.

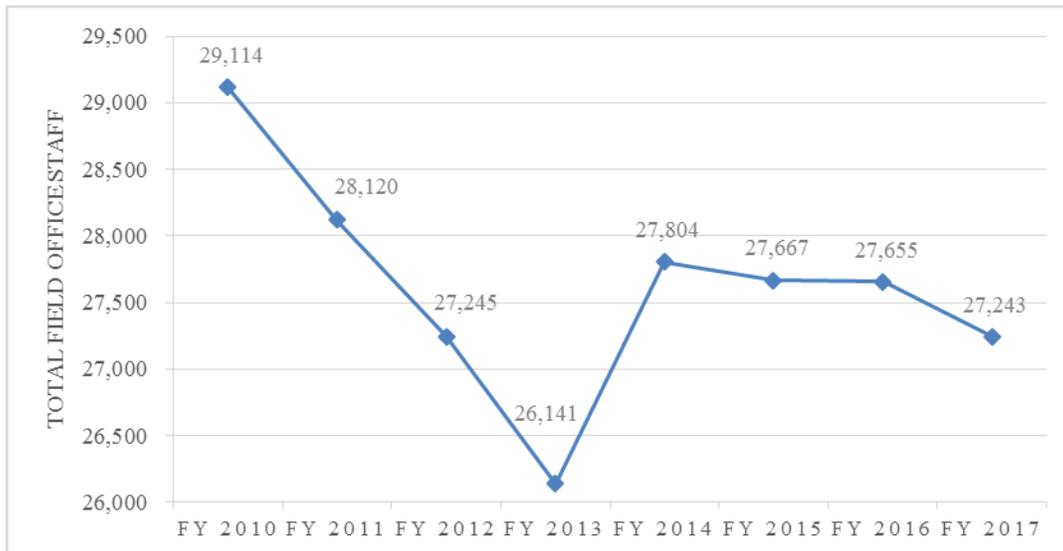
⁴ Of these 9 million applications, about 3.7 million were processed online.

⁵ The bulleted list is not all-inclusive of the workloads field offices processed in FY 2016.

⁶ SSA reported that in FY 2017, the average wait time for visitors with an appointment was 4 minutes and 27 minutes for those without an appointment.

receive extensive training and mentoring from experienced staff before they become proficient in their jobs. In FY 2014, SSA began hiring new staff, but, as of FY 2017, SSA had not fully recovered to FY 2010 staff levels. In FY 2016, SSA implemented another hiring freeze because of the uncertainty related to FY 2017 funding. Figure 3 shows the changes in field office staffing levels from FYs 2010 through 2017.

Figure 3: Trends in Staffing Levels at Field Offices in All SSA Regions



Note: Source: SSA’s Office of Operations

SSA also told us that, in 2011, it started reducing field office operating hours because of limited funding. In August 2011, SSA began closing field offices nationwide 30 minutes earlier each day. In November 2012, SSA extended those early closures to 1 hour. In January 2013, SSA further reduced field office hours by closing every Wednesday at noon. However, in March 2015, SSA expanded the field office openings by 1 hour on each weekday but Wednesday. Field offices still close at noon on Wednesdays. As a result, as of October 2017, field offices were open to the public 4 fewer hours per week than before SSA made these changes.

Field Offices with the Longest and Shortest Wait Times

We contacted 14 field offices—10 with some of the longest FY 2016 wait times and 4 with some of the shortest FY 2016 wait times. Of the 14 field offices, 12 stated they were not adequately staffed. Of the two offices that claimed to have adequate staff, one had long customer wait times and one had short wait times. In addition, many of the offices, including one office that did not say it was understaffed, had new employees in training status that will require a long learning curve to become fully effective on the job.

Further, we identified 10 field offices that ranked in the top 50 with the longest wait times in at least 5 of the 7 years during FYs 2010 through 2016.⁷ One of the field offices had wait times

⁷ See Table B-1 for the list of field offices we identified.

among the top 50 in 6 of the 7 years and ranked either worst or second worst in 3 of those years. SSA told us this office had space limitations that contributed to longer wait times. Management at this office also told us, in addition to having a high number of total visitors, it serves a high number of low-income, non-English speaking, and homeless visitors who require more time to serve. These factors resulted in its long wait time history. SSA told us the office had enacted numerous operational changes, as well as ongoing office space renovations, which had started to improve wait times. SSA stated that there were many factors impacting wait times at any given time and field offices were continuously working to improve. However, after we identified these 10 offices, SSA provided details on measures the offices had taken to reduce wait times (see Appendix B).

We also looked for other field offices (with similar staffing and visitor counts but with shorter wait times) within 10 miles of the 10 offices that repeatedly were in the top 50 longest wait times in FYs 2010 through 2016. We identified three offices near the Wilshire Center office in California that met these criteria. The Area Director over these offices told us Wilshire Center was unique (for such reasons as staff experience levels, number of foreign visitors, and the office's physical layout), and the long wait times were explained based on its specific circumstances.

The Regional Commissioners and Deputy Commissioner for Operations receive a monthly report of the 20 field offices with the longest appointment and non-appointment wait times. Identifying these field offices reminds regional and/or local management to review their operations, modify reception area management, or temporarily shift staff or work, as needed. In November 2016, SSA began tracking how often each office appeared on the top 20 lists in the previous 6 months. Before that date, the monthly reports did not provide historical data.

SSA Strategies to Improve Wait Times

To improve customer wait times at field offices, SSA uses such strategies as promoting eServices; providing SHPCs in field offices; using WSU capacity to relieve some of the stress on the busiest field offices; using VSD and work sharing; approving overtime; and sharing best practices.

SSA Express Initiative – eServices and SHPC

SSA set a goal to deliver innovative and quality service by expanding online access through SSA Express.⁸ SSA Express includes various initiatives, all with the same goal of offering customers additional service options.

SSA takes a multi-faceted approach in promoting its eServices. All field offices publicize eServices with posters and advertisements that air on Social Security Television, which is played in all field offices. Additionally, some field office employees said they inform in-office visitors about services they could accomplish online. The Agency also has Public Affairs Specialists

⁸ SSA, *Annual Performance Plan FY 2017-FY 2018*, April 2017, p. 7.

who communicate with local, State, and national groups and place articles in local newspapers to promote eServices. Further, SSA has a billboard campaign and maintains blogs, email campaigns, and social media to promote eServices. To illustrate its success, SSA stated that, in 2016, about 52 percent of all retirement claims were filed online.

The SHPC program is also part of the SSA Express Initiative.⁹ Field office managers may use SHPCs to manage walk-in traffic, minimize high visitor wait times, and manage workflow by allowing customers to complete their business online. Customers can complete their business on the SHPC or be referred to an employee after they complete select online services on the SHPC. Some services that can be completed online through an SHPC are

- requesting a replacement Social Security card in select States,
- appealing a decision,
- requesting an estimate for retirement benefits, and
- applying for retirement, disability, and Medicare benefits.

Although SHPCs are a self-service tool, an SSA employee assists visitors with questions or comments. SHPCs also help educate the public on the various online services SSA offers. In November 2017, SSA told us there were 1,929 SHPCs in 834 field offices. SSA representatives believed expanding the SHPC program to additional field offices would help shorten wait times and reduce foot traffic. Nevertheless, they stated that SHPC expansion is contingent on the budget and executive concurrence. As of September 2017, SSA had not conducted any studies to determine whether SHPCs were succeeding in reducing wait times. Additionally, we received mixed reviews about the benefits of SHPC from the field offices we contacted.¹⁰

WSUs

WSUs assist field offices by handling RSHI, Disability Insurance, and associated initial Supplemental Security Income entitlement claims filed online. SSA told us WSUs receive approximately 86 percent of all online RSHI claims and 11 percent of all disability claims. There are 16 WSUs nationwide, and, as resources and capacity become available, SSA stated it would continue expanding the volume of online claims WSUs process.

In addition to handling online claims, over the last 2 years, SSA has implemented the Field Office Assistance Effort, in which WSUs worked claims filed over the telephone from targeted field offices (identified by the regions), allowing them to divert resources to other priority workloads. SSA told us that, in FY 2016, WSUs handled over 35,000 retirement claims made over the telephone from local field offices, which allowed them to process medical continuing disability reviews, reduce total wait times, and improve appointment availability. SSA also

⁹ The program began in 2008 in the Dallas Region, and SSA implemented it nationally in 2014.

¹⁰ Of the 14 field offices we reviewed, 4 had SHPCs and believed they helped reduce wait times; 5 had SHPCs but did not believe they helped reduce wait times; 2 had only 1 SHPC and believed they needed more for them to be useful; and 3 did not have SHPCs and did not want them.

stated that for FY 2017, the WSUs processed over 2 million RSHI Internet claims, and over 145,000 Disability and Supplemental Security Income Internet claims, as well as other workloads targeted toward assisting field offices. If not handled by the WSUs, these workloads would have resulted in increased visitors and telephone traffic for the field offices.

SSA stated it would continue exploring ways to use additional WSU capacity to assist with field office workloads. Although SSA had not conducted any studies to measure the WSUs' impact on field office wait times, we are encouraged by this strategy and recommend SSA consider the cost-effectiveness of expanding this initiative. That is, SSA should monitor customer wait times at the national level, on a real-time basis. Doing so, would allow the Agency to expand its work-sharing program by transferring mobile workloads, based on Agency priorities, on a real-time basis.

VSD and Work Sharing

SSA has been using VSD as an alternative service delivery method since 2009. VSD allows SSA to provide services to individuals at convenient and remote sites, such as hospitals, libraries, community centers, American Indian tribal centers, and homeless shelters.¹¹ In October 2017, SSA stated it had about 775 VSD units nationwide—700 in SSA offices and 75 at third-party sites. SSA reported that VSD was used to complete over 110,000 transactions in FY 2017.

While SSA's primary use of VSD has been for internal employee training, the technology can also assist field offices in serving the public and reducing wait times. For example, one field office can assist another by taking some of its interviews using a VSD device. The customer goes into a private room and uses the VSD device to participate in an interview with an SSA employee in another office, thus decreasing that individual's wait time.

In addition, SSA has placed VSD equipment in third-party locations, such as Native American reservations. This allows individuals to interact face-to-face with SSA without traveling a long distance to a field office. As of October 2017, SSA had not evaluated the use and effectiveness of VSD for improving wait times. However, of the 14 field offices we interviewed, 4 used VSD only for the deaf and hard-of-hearing community, 1 used VSD to conduct interviews for a remote Native American reservation, 2 had the VSD equipment but did not use it,¹² and 7 did not have VSD equipment.

In addition, SSA told us field offices share other portable workloads.

- Offices can share the processing of program integrity workloads such as Supplemental Security Income redeterminations and medical and work continuing disability reviews.
- Offices can assist one another in taking initial and post-entitlement appointments if an office has a facility or natural disaster that prevents it from doing so.

¹¹ SSA, *Annual Performance Plan FY 2017-FY 2018*, April 2017, p. 9.

¹² The two offices stated they did not use VSD because they did not have staff available to assist other offices.

- The Telephone Systems Replacement Project allows a field office to answer incoming general inquiry telephone calls for another field office.

Overtime

SSA allocates overtime to the regions based on certain criteria, such as workload prioritization, workload share, capacity, and critical or specialized needs. Field offices use their overtime allocations to assist with customers' needs and balance workloads. For example, Customer Service Representatives (CSR) use overtime to complete various post-entitlement workloads—after they have assisted customers in the reception area. The use of overtime to address the post-entitlement workloads provides CSRs more time to assist in serving the reception area and therefore reduces wait times. To date, SSA has not evaluated overtime and its effectiveness in improving wait times.

Best Practices

Each region communicates field office best practices through various methods, such as training, email reminders, all manager calls, and discussions during Area Director visits to field offices. SSA also has regional VIPr coordinators who share information and best practices across the nation. Some examples of best practices that SSA identified to help shorten field office wait times include the following.

- Analyze management information to identify trends in visitor volume and wait times to make projections and plan for adequate coverage during peak times.
- Use an all-hands-on-deck approach when wait times or visitor volumes reach a certain point or at high points of the day, such as first thing in the morning.
- Use the public announcement system to broadcast enumeration requirements and advertise eServices.
- Train field office employees on an interviewing technique in which the CSR asks clarifying questions and summarizes the reason for the visit within 30 seconds. This helps decrease the amount of time the CSR spends in each interview, while ensuring they assist each customer with all matters.
- Manage “no show” appointments by having the employee scheduled to handle that appointment conduct quick interviews of other visitors in the reception area until their next appointment time.
- Use one reception window for topics that can be handled quickly and another for more complicated business that will take longer to complete.

We note that, despite SSA's initiatives and efforts to reduce wait times, visitors to field offices had experienced a 32-percent increase in average wait times in recent years—from 19 minutes in FY 2010 to 25 minutes in FY 2017. While we applaud SSA's use of numerous initiatives to help reduce field office wait times, we encourage the Agency to periodically track the use and effectiveness of those initiatives.

CONCLUSIONS

SSA faces many challenges in improving field office wait times and uses numerous strategies to address those challenges. However, despite SSA's efforts, wait times for visitors to field offices in all SSA regions and the number of visitors who waited longer than 1 hour for service have gradually increased. SSA estimates an increase from 59 million visitors in 2016 to 75 million in 2025. Many customers may continue to seek service through an in-person visit. As such, SSA should consider developing more enterprise-level methods that provide real-time statistics to better serve its field office customers. In addition, to ensure its customer service strategies are reducing wait times, SSA should periodically monitor their effectiveness, where possible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommended that SSA:

1. Determine the feasibility of using technology, at an enterprise-wide level, to identify high-stress offices and transfer eligible workloads, based on Agency priorities, on a real-time basis.
2. Periodically track the use and effectiveness of ongoing initiatives and tools used to monitor and reduce visitor wait times, where possible.

AGENCY COMMENTS AND OIG RESPONSE

SSA disagreed with both our recommendations.

Regarding Recommendation 1, SSA stated it published the *Information Technology Modernization Plan* in October 2017. This Plan describes initiatives to redesign and re-engineer its overall delivery service process. SSA stated the Plan will address the intent of our recommendation.

Prior to the formal comments to this report, SSA did not inform us of any new initiatives to address customer wait times as part of its *Information Technology Modernization Plan*. While we agree that information technology modernization is a positive initiative, SSA's response did not define how this action would specifically address customer wait times or the timeframe in which these changes will be implemented. This Plan is in the early stages of development. In fact, many of the initiatives in the Plan are not expected to be implemented until 2022 or later. Given the historically high number of customers who waited longer than 1 hour and the expected significant increase in the number of customers through 2025, we strongly encourage SSA to take action sooner than its planned modernization roll out to address its customer wait times. In the interim, SSA should use its technology, at an enterprise-wide level, to identify high-stress offices and transfer eligible workloads, based on Agency priorities, on a real-time basis.

Regarding Recommendation 2, SSA stated that tracking and measuring the effectiveness of the initiatives and tools it uses to monitor and reduce wait times is important. However, SSA stated it must use its limited resources efficiently to ensure the tools and initiatives it uses remain current and aligned with SSA's business process redesign.

We continue to believe SSA should periodically track the use and effectiveness of ongoing initiatives and tools used to monitor and reduce visitor wait times. In fact, we think doing so ensures the efficient use of SSA's limited resources. If SSA's tools and initiatives are ineffective, both time and money are wasted. Hence, not only should SSA evaluate its methods of monitoring and reducing wait times, it should evaluate any future methods developed as part of its new business process redesign.

The Agency's full comments are included in Appendix C.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rona Lawson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rona Lawson
Assistant Inspector General for Audit

APPENDICES

Appendix A – SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

To accomplish our objectives, we:

- Reviewed applicable Social Security Administration (SSA) policies, procedures, and operating instructions.
- Reviewed previous Office of the Inspector General reports related to field office wait times, performance, and operating hours.
- Prepared and submitted detailed questionnaires to SSA to determine factors affecting field office customer wait times and strategies it had in place to monitor and manage wait times.
- Obtained and reviewed the following data from SSA for Fiscal Years 2010 through 2016.¹
 - The total number of visitors to all field offices in each Region.
 - The average wait time for all visitors to field offices in each Region.
 - The number of visitors who waited longer than 1 hour at field offices in each Region.
 - The average wait time for visitors to each field office nationwide.
 - The number of open field offices nationwide.
 - The number of staff at each field office nationwide.
- Interviewed staff at 14 selected field offices (10 with some of the longest FY 2016 wait times and 4 with some of the shortest) and 1 Area Director Office.

The principal entities audited were SSA’s field offices under the Office of the Deputy Commissioner for Operations. We determined the data used for this audit were sufficiently reliable to meet our audit objectives. Our review of internal controls was limited to gaining an understanding of SSA’s procedures for monitoring field office wait times.

We conducted our review in Atlanta, Georgia, between January and November 2017. We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

¹ At the end of our audit, SSA provided us with FY 2017 wait time totals and averages.

Appendix B – FIELD OFFICES WITH CONSISTENTLY LONG WAIT TIMES

We analyzed wait time data for visitors without an appointment for the approximate 1,220 Social Security Administration (SSA) field offices for Fiscal Years (FY) 2010 through 2016.¹ We identified 10 field offices that ranked in the top 50 offices with the longest wait times in at least 5 of the 7 years, as shown in Table B-1.

Table B-1: Field Offices with Consistently Long Wait Times

| Field Office | Number of Times in the Top 50 Longest Wait Times FYs 2010 - 2016 | Longest Average Wait Time (Minutes) FYs 2010 - 2016 | Year of Longest Wait Time | Staff Eligible for Telework? |
|-----------------------------|--|---|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| Allapattah, Florida | 6 | 61.5 | 2013 | No |
| Perrine, Florida | 6 | 51.3 | 2016 | No |
| Guam | 5 | 66.3 | 2013 | No |
| Mid Cities, Texas | 5 | 64.2 | 2014 | No |
| Wilshire Center, California | 5 | 63.5 | 2014 | No |
| Patchogue, New York | 5 | 60.4 | 2014 | No |
| Inglewood, California | 5 | 58.3 | 2014 | No |
| Torrance, California | 5 | 55.4 | 2014 | Yes |
| San Antonio Downtown, Texas | 5 | 54.9 | 2016 | No |
| Orlando, Florida | 5 | 52.2 | 2014 | No |

Note: Source: SSA's Office of Operations

After we notified SSA of the above 10 field offices, the Agency provided some updated information concerning wait times at these offices. Specifically, SSA noted that 7 of the 10 offices had shorter wait times in FY 2017 than in FY 2016. While the average improvement for these seven offices was 8.5 minutes, two improved significantly. The San Antonio Downtown office went from 54.9 minutes in FY 2016 to 41.2 minutes in FY 2017 (a 13.7-minute improvement) and the Patchogue office went from 37.2 minutes in FY 2016 to 20.4 minutes in FY 2017 (a 16.8-minute improvement). The Allapattah, Mid Cities, and Torrance offices experienced increased wait times in FY 2017. However, the average increase for these three offices was only 0.7 minutes.

SSA also highlighted that the Inglewood, Patchogue, and Wilshire Center offices consistently reduced their wait times each year from FY 2015 to FY 2017, as shown in Table B-2.

¹ At the end of our audit, SSA provided us with FY 2017 wait time totals and averages.

Table B–2: Field Offices that Improved Wait Times from FY 2015 Through FY 2017

| Field Office | FY 2015 Wait Time (Minutes) | FY 2016 Wait Time (Minutes) | FY 2017 Wait Time (Minutes) |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Inglewood, California | 53.0 | 42.0 | 35.3 |
| Patchogue, New York | 49.4 | 37.2 | 20.4 |
| Wilshire Center, California | 46.2 | 42.6 | 36.7 |

Note: Source: SSA’s Office of Operations

The Agency told us that each of the 10 field offices in Table B–1 had taken measures to reduce customer wait times. In general, these measures included improvements to workflows and reception management. Some of the common steps field offices took to improve wait times included using an all-hands-on-deck approach during peak busy times; designating a window for screening or quick interviews, such as benefit verification requests; promoting eServices and Self-Help Personal Computer availability; and having management staff assist more with visitors in the reception area. Some offices also added new staff that helped reduce wait times. SSA noted that field offices in Orlando, Guam, and Torrance have also shown significant improvements in wait times after new initiatives were put into place in FY 2017.

Appendix C – AGENCY COMMENTS



SOCIAL SECURITY

MEMORANDUM

Date: February 2, 2018

Refer To: SIJ-3

To: Gale S. Stone
Acting Inspector General

From: Stephanie Hall/s/
Acting Deputy Chief of Staff

Subject: Office of the Inspector General Draft Report, "Customer Wait Times in the Social Security Administration's Field Offices" (A-04-18-50260)--INFORMATION

Thank you for the opportunity to review the draft report. Please see our attached comments.

Please let me know if we can be of further assistance. You may direct staff inquiries to Gary S. Hatcher at (410) 965-0680.

Attachment

**COMMENTS ON THE OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL DRAFT REPORT,
“CUSTOMER WAIT TIMES IN THE SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION’S
FIELD OFFICES” (A-04-18-50260)**

General Comment

We are committed to evaluating the effectiveness of our current practices, and identifying new and innovative ways to improve our processes in order to provide quality service to the American public.

Our agency relies upon various processes to effectively balance available resources to respond to requests for service. Our service environment continues to evolve based on many factors, including technology, and we expect that changes in our operating environment will continue into the future. In October 2017, we published our Information Technology Modernization plan, which describes our initiatives to replace our core systems with modern systems that enhance the customer experience. As part of this plan, we will use agile software development to reengineer our business processes by optimizing end-to-end processing, redesigning workflows, reducing manual transactions, and using analytics to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of our programs.

While we agree with the intent of the recommendations in this report—to reduce customer wait times—we believe that they are too limited as they are written with our current process in mind and do not take into consideration our aggressive plan to reengineer and redesign our business processes to meet service demands through increased efficiency. Developing enterprise-wide technology geared toward field office workload transfer may not be the most valuable use of our limited resources at this time. As we move forward, we will use data such as that identified during this review to inform our planning and methodology. We also acknowledge the value of tracking and measuring the effectiveness of initiatives and tools utilized to achieve our strategic objectives.

Recommendation 1

Determine the feasibility of using technology, at an enterprise-wide level, to identify high-stress offices and transfer eligible workloads, based on Agency priorities, on a real-time basis.

Response

We disagree. As noted above, we believe our broader plan to redesign and reengineer our overall service delivery processes will address the intent of this recommendation.

Recommendation 2

Periodically track the use and effectiveness of ongoing initiatives and tools used to monitor and reduce visitor wait times, where possible.

Response

We disagree. As we create new tools and initiatives, we agree that tracking and measuring effectiveness is important; however, we must use our limited resources efficiently, ensuring that the tools and initiatives we use remain current and aligned with our business process redesign.

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