

GAO

United States General Accounting Office
Briefing Report to Congressional
Requesters

June 1989

SOCIAL SECURITY

Staff Reductions and Service Quality



GAO/HRD-89-106BR

Human Resources Division

B-226484

June 16, 1989

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chairman, Subcommittee on Labor,
Health and Human Services, Education,
and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

The Honorable William H. Natcher
Chairman, Subcommittee on Labor,
Health and Human Services, Education,
and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
House of Representatives

This briefing report responds to your Subcommittees' request that we examine several issues related to the quality of service provided by the Social Security Administration (SSA). Specifically, you asked us to (1) compare the morale of SSA employees with that of employees of other federal agencies, (2) assess the quality of SSA's processing of its post-entitlement workloads, (3) review the nature and extent of SSA's public information activities, and (4) examine SSA's new methodology for measuring waiting times in its field offices.

This report is based on an analysis of available SSA data and reports, as well as discussions with SSA headquarters and field personnel. Additional details about our objectives, scope, and methodology are discussed in appendix I. The results of our review, which are discussed in detail in the appendixes to this report, can be summarized briefly as follows:

- Morale at SSA has been identified as a problem in GAO and SSA surveys since 1986. SSA employees and managers attribute the low morale primarily to the staff reductions, which have been underway since fiscal year 1985. We found no studies that specifically compared morale at SSA with morale at other federal agencies. We identified a governmentwide survey of job satisfaction—a factor related to morale—done by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board in 1986. The Board's survey found that job satisfaction at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) ranked 21st out of the 22 largest federal agencies. At the time of the survey, SSA employees comprised about 60 percent of the HHS employees

surveyed. The Board did not determine separate results on SSA employees' job satisfaction. However, we believe it is unlikely that job satisfaction at SSA is significantly higher than at HHS overall. The fraction of HHS employees who reported to the Board that they were not satisfied with their jobs (45 percent) was almost equal to the fraction of SSA managers and employees who reported to GAO in 1986 that morale in their units was low (42 percent).

- In a 1988 GAO survey, SSA field office managers and employees ranked the quality of SSA's service in processing post-entitlement workloads lower than most other services provided by SSA. Measures of how well SSA processes such workloads are limited. Available data, however, suggest that SSA performance was stable over the fiscal year 1984-88 period. SSA began making substantial staff reductions in fiscal year 1985.
- The amount of time and resources devoted to public information activities at SSA field offices has declined since 1984. However, it is not clear whether this decline has had an adverse impact on service to the public.
- In response to criticisms by GAO and the Congress of its original methodology, SSA has changed its method of measuring how long the public waits to be served in SSA field offices. We believe SSA's new method for measuring waiting times in field offices is better than the old method. The new method provides for a more complete measure of waiting time, appears to have reduced the incentive for field offices to manipulate the study results, and is less of an administrative burden.

For fiscal year 1990, SSA has proposed a staff cut of about 2,000 which, if approved by the Congress, will bring the 6-year 17,000 staff reduction program to an end. According to SSA, the staff cuts will have saved the social security trust funds a cumulative total of nearly \$2 billion through fiscal year 1990; thereafter, the staff cuts should save about \$580 million per year.

SSA has asserted that its service quality has remained high in its service quality reports submitted to your Committees over the last several years. Its most recent report, submitted in March 1989 and covering performance for the quarters ending September and December 1988, generally indicates stable performance in the agency, with a major exception being the backlogs and processing time for hearings before administrative law judges, which have remained relatively high over the last 2 years. On the other hand, from 1986 to 1988, the percentage of field office managers who rated their units' performance as declining quadrupled from 11 to 47 percent.

As requested by your offices, we did not obtain written agency comments on a draft of this report because to do so would have delayed its issuance; however, we discussed its contents with SSA officials and incorporated their comments where appropriate. As arranged with your offices, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 10 days from its issue date. At that time, we will send copies to other congressional committees and members; the Secretary of Health and Human Services; the Director, Office of Management and Budget; the Commissioner of Social Security; and other interested parties. We will also make copies available to others on request.

The major contributors to this briefing report are listed in appendix VI.



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Abbreviations

CDR	continuing disability review
DDS	Disability Determination Service
DI	Disability Insurance
GAO	General Accounting Office
HHS	Department of Health and Human Services
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
RSI	Retirement and Survivors Insurance
SSA	Social Security Administration
SSI	Supplemental Security Income

Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The objectives of our review, based on the Subcommittees' concerns, were to (1) compare the morale in SSA with that of other federal agencies, (2) assess the quality of SSA's processing of its post-entitlement workloads, (3) review the nature and extent of SSA's public information activities, and (4) examine SSA's new methodology for measuring waiting times in its field offices.

Information on morale in other federal agencies was sought to provide a broader framework for assessing the morale of SSA's employees. As agreed with your offices, in comparing SSA's morale with that of other federal agencies, we limited our work to existing studies and SSA data. We first studied the results of one SSA and two GAO surveys of SSA personnel completed in the last 3 years. We then conducted a literature search of several computerized data bases that contain information on a variety of studies affecting federal agencies. Two relevant studies with quantifiable data were identified: a GAO study of the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and a U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board study of 22 of the largest federal agencies.

We examined the quality of post-entitlement workloads which, in a 1988 GAO survey of 11 SSA services, field office managers and employees rated lower than most other services.¹ In making our assessment, we relied on SSA performance data at the national level. Further, we focused on data that would help in making trend analyses of SSA's processing time and accuracy during the years of its staff reduction program.

Field office managers rated public information activities lower than most other services as well. We reviewed and analyzed SSA data showing the time spent by SSA field office personnel on public information activities. We also discussed these activities with officials from SSA headquarters, officials from all 10 SSA regional offices, and one field office manager from each region. In addition, we analyzed two studies by the American Council of Life Insurance and the Home Testing Institute that provide independently developed data on the effectiveness of SSA public information activities.² We did not evaluate the methodology or verify the data in these studies.

¹Social Security: Views of Agency Personnel on Service Quality and Staff Reductions (GAO/HRD-89-37BR, Feb. 10, 1989).

²The American Council of Life Insurance is a professional organization made up of representatives of the life insurance industry. The Home Testing Institute is a for-profit organization that conducts consumer surveys.

Finally, we compared the old and new study methodologies for measuring waiting times in SSA field offices to determine whether improvements had been made. Earlier GAO work had indicated that the old methodology had understated waiting times. We talked with SSA headquarters and regional officials and with SSA personnel in 10 field offices (1 in each of SSA's 10 regions) that participated in the waiting time study using the new methodology. More specifically, we discussed the pros and cons of the new methodology with the office managers and the individuals who both acted as the office receptionist during the waiting time study and also recorded the study data.

Our review work was done between December 1988 and April 1989 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Morale at SSA Compared to Morale at Other Federal Agencies

Several surveys by GAO and SSA in the last several years have shown that morale is a persistent problem at SSA. While there is little information to compare morale at SSA with that of other federal agencies, the available information suggests that job satisfaction at SSA may be lower than at most major federal agencies. GAO data indicate a sizable drop in SSA staff morale between 1986 and 1988, which managers attribute to the staff reductions.

Morale at SSA

GAO and SSA have conducted three surveys of morale among large groups of SSA employees, all of which showed morale to be a problem. In 1986 and 1988, GAO sent questionnaires to a statistical sample of SSA field office managers and employees asking them to rate morale in their units.¹ The 1988 questionnaire also asked field office managers to rate their own morale.

The 1988 survey results—prepared at the request of your Subcommittees—showed that field office managers and employees rated their units' morale significantly lower in 1988 than they did in 1986. In 1986, 44 percent of the managers and 20 percent of the employees rated their units' morale as high; 29 percent of the managers and 52 percent of the employees rated their units' morale as low. In 1988, only 23 percent of managers and 12 percent of employees rated their units' morale as high; 44 percent of managers and 64 percent of employees rated their units' morale as low. Thirty percent of managers rated their own morale as high, while 39 percent said it was low. SSA employees and managers attributed the low morale primarily to the staff reductions, which have been underway since 1985.

SSA's survey, done in 1987, also showed morale to be a problem. Forty-two percent of its supervisors in grades 14 and below rated their own morale as poor, and 54 percent of the supervisors rated their employees' morale as poor.

Table II.1 compares the results of the three surveys.

¹Social Security: Stable Leadership and Better Management Needed to Improve Effectiveness (GAO/HRD-87-39, Mar. 18, 1987).

Social Security: Views of Agency Personnel on Service Quality and Staff Reductions (GAO/HRD-89-37BR, Feb. 10, 1989).

**Appendix II
Morale at SSA Compared to Morale at Other
Federal Agencies**

Table II.1: How SSA Managers and Employees Rated Their Units' Morale in GAO and SSA Surveys

Figures in percents

	GAO surveys				SSA survey
	Field office managers		Field office employees		All supervisors grade 14 and below
	1986	1988	1986	1988	1987
Very high/high	44	23	20	12	28
Neither high nor low	27	33	28	23	18
Low/very low	29	44	52	64	54

SSA is aware that managers' and employees' morale has been low and that they are dissatisfied with the staff reduction initiative. In 1988, SSA held "management forums" in each of its 10 regions and 6 program service centers and with headquarters staff in Baltimore. About 10,000 SSA managers attended the forums, at which Commissioner Dorcas Hardy and senior officials explained her agenda and solicited managers' input on improving SSA's operations and work environment. SSA established a task force to follow up on the managers' recommendations, which published two reports summarizing the actions taken to address them. Additional forums are planned for 1989.

What effect the management forum initiative will have on employee morale is hard to predict. SSA's continuing staff reduction program will complicate improvement of employee morale at least through fiscal year 1990.

**Morale at Other
Federal Agencies**

We found only two recent studies that specifically quantified employee morale or job satisfaction at one or more federal agencies. The first is a governmentwide survey of job satisfaction done by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board in 1986.² The second is a survey of morale among OPM employees, done by GAO in 1987 as part of an overall management study of that agency.³

The results of these studies are not strictly comparable with the survey results at SSA, because the studies examined different variables and populations at different times and asked different questions. However,

²A Special Study: Working for the Federal Government - Job Satisfaction and Federal Employees (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, Oct. 21, 1987).

³Managing Human Resources: Greater OPM Leadership Needed to Address Critical Challenges (GAO/GGD-89-19, Jan. 19, 1989).

the survey results do seem to indicate that morale at SSA is lower than at OPM. They also indicate that overall job satisfaction, a factor contributing to morale, is lower at HHS—and, we believe, at SSA—than at most other federal agencies. The two studies are discussed below.

In 1986, the Merit Systems Protection Board conducted a survey of job satisfaction in the federal government. The Board asked a stratified random sample of permanent civilian employees at all grade levels in the 22 largest federal agencies, including HHS, whether they were satisfied with their jobs and whether they liked working at their agencies.

HHS ranked 21st out of the 22 agencies in the percentage of its employees who were satisfied with their jobs and 20th in the percentage of employees who liked working at their agencies. (See table II.2.) Only 55 percent of HHS employees reported that they were satisfied with their jobs, compared to the governmentwide average of 68 percent. Also, only 59 percent of HHS employees reported that they liked working at their agency, compared to the governmentwide average of 71 percent. The Board's study did not determine the specific reasons for relative job satisfaction at each agency.

**Appendix II
Morale at SSA Compared to Morale at Other
Federal Agencies**

**Table II.2: Job Satisfaction of Federal
Employees, 1986**

Agency	Percent of employees who	
	Are satisfied with their jobs	Like working at their agencies
Rank in parentheses		
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	75 (1)	83 (1)
Small Business Administration	75 (1)	71 (6)
Army	74 (3)	72 (5)
Transportation	72 (4)	70 (11)
Air Force	71 (5)	76 (2)
Navy	70 (6)	75 (3)
Justice	69 (7)	73 (4)
Other Department of Defense	69 (7)	71 (6)
Interior	69 (7)	71 (6)
Veterans Administration	68 (10)	71 (6)
Agriculture	66 (11)	71 (6)
Commerce	66 (11)	68 (13)
Energy	65 (13)	67 (14)
State	64 (14)	69 (12)
Treasury	64 (14)	65 (17)
Environmental Protection Agency	62 (16)	67 (14)
General Services Administration	61 (17)	67 (14)
Labor	60 (18)	63 (18)
Office of Personnel Management	60 (18)	63 (18)
Housing and Urban Development	56 (20)	58 (21)
Health and Human Services	55 (21)	59 (20)
Education	48 (22)	48 (22)
Governmentwide average	68	71

At the time of the Board's survey, SSA made up about 60 percent of HHS's total staff, and a proportionate number of SSA employees were included in the study's sample of HHS employees. The study was not designed to provide separate results for SSA employees. However, we believe that it is unlikely that SSA job satisfaction is significantly higher than the overall HHS results. In 1986, the same year as the Board's survey, 42 percent of SSA's field office managers and employees who responded to our survey stated that morale in their units was low. This compares to the 45 percent of HHS employees who were not satisfied with their jobs and the 41 percent who did not like working at HHS.

**Appendix II
Morale at SSA Compared to Morale at Other
Federal Agencies**

GAO conducted the second study of morale at OPM. In late 1987, OPM employees in grades 13 and above were asked to characterize the level of morale in their units. That August, SSA had asked its supervisors in grades 14 and below a similar question. A comparison of the two surveys suggest that like SSA, OPM has morale problems. While more SSA than OPM supervisors rated their units' morale as high (28 percent for SSA compared to 23 percent for OPM), more SSA than OPM supervisors rated their units' morale as poor (54 percent for SSA compared to 44 percent for OPM). OPM has also been experiencing staff reductions in recent years.

Quality of Post-Entitlement Workloads

SSA spent more than 30 percent of its resources processing post-entitlement workloads in fiscal year 1988. However, in recent years, SSA managers and employees have been concerned about how well SSA processes these workloads. In a 1988 GAO survey, field office managers and employees rated SSA's timeliness in processing post-entitlement workloads lower than most other services provided by SSA field offices.¹ The objective data available to track SSA's performance in processing these workloads are limited. SSA does collect some data on accuracy, processing time, and the amount of work pending in field offices. These data suggest that SSA's performance in processing its post-entitlement workloads has generally been stable over the last several years.

In an assessment of SSA's management, GAO reported on shortcomings in SSA's management information systems.² SSA agrees that these systems need improvement and is developing a plan to accomplish this. Currently, SSA is revising its quality assurance system to provide more and better data on the accuracy of its post-entitlement workloads.

The following sections describe the data available to measure SSA's performance in post-entitlement workloads during fiscal years 1984-88.

Accuracy

SSA tracks process accuracy for post-entitlement workloads only to a limited extent. Process accuracy is a measure of the extent to which a case is adjudicated in compliance with SSA policy and procedures. The only specific post-entitlement workloads for which process accuracy rates are determined are redeterminations in the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program and initial continuing disability review (CDR) determinations, done by state agencies called Disability Determination Services (DDSS), in the Disability Insurance (DI) program. For the Retirement and Survivors Insurance (RSI) program, SSA determines a composite process accuracy rate for most, but not all, post-entitlement workloads included in its RSI postadjudicative appraisal system.

With few exceptions, the available measures show that accuracy rates have been fairly stable, as illustrated in table III.1.

¹Social Security: Views of Agency Personnel on Service Quality and Staff Reductions (GAO/HRD-89-37BR, Feb. 10, 1989).

²Social Security: Stable Leadership and Better Management Needed to Improve Effectiveness (GAO/HRD-87-39, Mar. 18, 1987).

**Appendix III
Quality of Post-Entitlement Workloads**

Table III.1: Post-Entitlement Process Accuracy Indicators for Fiscal Years 1984-88

Figures in percents					
Indicator	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988
SSI redeterminations:					
Basic dollar accuracy rate ^a	97.1	96.8	95.9	95.8	96.6
Basic evidentiary accuracy rate ^b	84.3	85.2	84.4	85.4	92.1
DDS initial CDR determinations process accuracy rate					
	94.1	^c	99.0	95.5	96.4
RSI post-entitlement workloads:					
Basic dollar accuracy rate ^a	^d	96.0	96.6	97.0	96.9
Basic evidentiary accuracy rate ^b	^d	99.1	99.0	98.9	98.9

^aBasic dollar accuracy is the percentage of cases free of dollar error of \$5 or more.

^bBasic evidentiary accuracy is the percentage of cases free of evidentiary errors. For SSI redeterminations, a basic evidentiary error means the evidence in the case file to support a decision on a factor of entitlement or payment is absent, conflicting, or insufficient. In the RSI post-entitlement workloads, a basic evidentiary error exists when required evidence that has a significant dollar impact or that has major legal or regulatory significance is incomplete or missing.

^cThere was a moratorium on CDRs in fiscal year 1985.

^dBecause of changes made in the RSI quality assurance sample in fiscal year 1985, comparable results are not available for fiscal year 1984.

The table shows a substantial increase in the basic evidentiary accuracy rate for SSI redeterminations in fiscal year 1988. This increase is due to a change in how SSA classified its evidentiary errors. Beginning in fiscal year 1988, over 40 types of evidentiary errors that had previously been counted as basic evidentiary errors were no longer counted as such because SSA determined that these errors had no significant dollar impact. SSA believes that the fiscal year 1988 evidentiary accuracy rate is a better measure of SSA's performance.

The table also shows a temporary increase in the process accuracy rate for CDRs in fiscal year 1986. An SSA official said that this happened because, during part of the year, errors made in mental impairment cases were not charged as errors because a new policy on mental impairment cases had just been implemented. The following year, when errors in mental impairment cases were counted during the entire year, the accuracy rate declined.

Processing Times

SSA regularly tracks processing time for only four RSI post-entitlement workloads. Processing time is not tracked for any such workloads in the SSI and DI programs.

SSA officials said that tracking of post-entitlement workload processing times is very limited for several reasons. SSA attaches a higher priority to tracking processing times for initial claims because initial claims applicants are not yet receiving benefits, while post-entitlement actions involve persons already receiving benefits. Also, they said, most post-entitlement workloads are "in and out" and tend not to take long to process in district offices.

The only individual RSI post-entitlement workloads for which SSA regularly reports processing times are work notices, death notices, change of address notices, and student benefit actions. Table III.2 shows that mean processing time for these workloads has improved since fiscal year 1985.

Table III.2: Mean Processing Time for Four RSI Post-Entitlement Workloads^a

Figures in days				
Workload	FY 1985	FY 1986	FY 1987	FY 1988
Work notices	10	8	9	5
Death notices	7	6	5	5
Change of address notices	8	7	6	6
Student benefit actions	8	6	7	6

^aBecause of changes made in the quality assurance sample in fiscal year 1985, comparable results are not available for fiscal year 1984.

Although SSA tracks processing time for post-entitlement workloads only to a very limited extent, it does track the volume of pending work or backlogs for many post-entitlement workloads in its operating components. The volume of pending work is not a strict measure of processing time, but changes in pending work often are associated with changes in processing times.

To determine whether backlogs in post-entitlement workloads in field offices are increasing, we tracked the volume of pending cases for 11 post-entitlement workloads at the end of fiscal years 1984 through 1988. Because of deletions or changes in workload categories over the 5-year period, we could not track the change in pending cases for five additional workloads, including continuing disability reviews, which are a major high-volume post-entitlement workload in field offices. Table III.3 shows that the volume of pending workloads increased from fiscal years 1984 to 1988 for 9 of the 11 workloads.

**Appendix III
Quality of Post-Entitlement Workloads**

Table III.3: Post-Entitlement Workloads Pending in Field Offices at the End of Fiscal Years 1984-88

Workload	FY 1984	FY 1985	FY 1986	FY 1987	FY 1988	Percent change 1984 to 1988
RSDI reconsiderations	56,707	63,277	76,131	66,080	68,033	+20
SSI reconsiderations	44,059	50,691	66,991	58,900	59,745	+36
RSDI overpayment decisions	25,785	18,787	16,106	10,737	11,267	-56
SSI overpayment decisions	96,632	67,249	89,734	95,886	98,611	+2
RSDI earnings enforcement	7,346	6,907	7,438	6,445	6,796	-8
RSDI representative payee	15,379	24,537	39,867	31,593	35,986	+134
SSI representative payee	4,139	8,785	7,622	12,629	13,817	+234
SSI redeterminations of eligibility	115,634	53,440	104,308	121,603	134,577	+16
Health insurance payment activity	2,831	3,675	3,600	0	2,976	+5
Supplemental medical insurance payment activity	2,453	2,909	3,033	3,946	5,888	+140
Earnings maintenance	5,088	4,605	4,350	4,113	6,757	+33

Although the volume of pending cases increased by more than 20 percent for six workloads, SSA budget officials said that these increases are not as significant as they would appear. Rather, SSA budget data show that because of productivity improvements in field offices, the staff-years needed to process the six backlogs are about the same or less in 1988 as they were in 1984, as shown in table III.4.

Table III.4: Staff-Years Needed to Process Pending Workloads in Fiscal Years 1984 and 1988

Workload	FY 1984	FY 1988
RSDI reconsiderations	94.0	94.0
SSI reconsiderations	67.0	68.0
RSDI representative payee	27.0	26.0
SSI representative payee	6.0	8.0
Supplemental medical insurance payment activity	0.5	1.0
Earnings maintenance	11.0	3.0

Quality of Public Information Activities

An important service SSA provides is informing the public about social security program requirements and activities. However, field office managers and employees in 1988 rated SSA's performance in providing this service lower than most of its other services. SSA statistics show a decline in the amount of time and the number of employees devoted to public information activities in field offices. District and branch office managers believe that this decline has hurt service to the public. Regional office officials whom we interviewed disagreed, stating that national promotional initiatives had compensated for the reductions in field office time spent in this area. Surveys by the American Council of Life Insurance and the Home Testing Institute show that public confidence in social security has increased, but the surveys disagree on whether public knowledge about social security has improved.

SSA Statistics Show a Decline in Field Office Public Information Activities

SSA budget data show that field office staff spent 46 fewer staff-years, or 24 percent less time, on public information activities in fiscal year 1988 than they did in fiscal year 1984. Table IV.1 shows by year the time spent on public information activities.

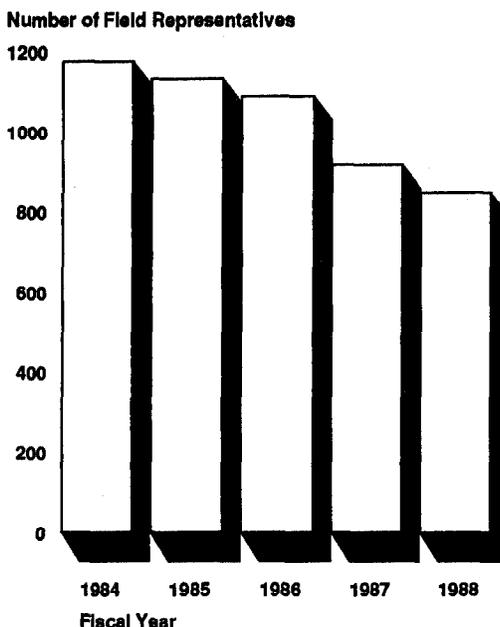
Table IV.1: Change in Field Office Staff-Years Spent on Public Information Activities From Fiscal Year 1984 Through 1988

Fiscal year	Staff-years	Percent change from prior year
1984	195	•
1985	246	+26
1986	193	-22
1987	188	-3
1988	149	-21

According to SSA, in fiscal year 1985 a significant effort was devoted to educating the public about taxation of social security benefits, accounting for the only increase in effort during the 5-year period.

Field representatives are field office employees who traditionally have performed public information activities. During the 1984-88 period, the number of field representatives declined by 28 percent, while total field office staff declined by 15 percent. Figure IV.1 illustrates the decline in the number of field representatives.

Figure IV.1: Field Representatives on Duty (End of Fiscal Years 1984-88)



Field Office Managers and Regional Officials Differ in Their Assessment of Public Information Activities

Because field office managers in June 1988 rated the quality of their offices' public information activities lower than most other services they provide, we interviewed field office managers to obtain more specific information about their concerns. We also interviewed regional office officials to obtain their perspectives on SSA public information activities.

Regional office officials that we interviewed presented a more positive picture than field office managers of SSA's public information activities. None of the 10 regional officials expressed concern about the level of public information activities in their regions, and all 10 said that SSA as a whole was devoting sufficient time and attention to this area.

Regional officials stated that SSA decided to have other field office employees, particularly field office managers, handle public information activities to offset the decline in field representatives, and these employees are performing these duties well.

They also said that field offices are spending less time on public information activities without adversely affecting service to the public because SSA as a whole has become more efficient in how it conducts its

public information activities. In particular, they cited (1) improved materials provided to field offices by SSA's Office of Information and (2) an increase in SSA's national public information campaigns on such matters as the 800 telephone service and the personal earnings and benefit estimate statement. They also cited a public information campaign on social security being done by the Advertising Council.¹ The Advertising Council campaign, begun in December 1987 and scheduled to continue through 1989, consists of a series of television, radio, newspaper, magazine, billboard, and transit advertisements informing the public about the different types of protection social security provides and emphasizing the long-term financial soundness of the social security trust funds.

Field office managers were generally more negative in their assessment of the adequacy of SSA's public information activities. Of the 10 field office managers that we interviewed, 7 were concerned about the level of public information activity in their districts and only 4 said that SSA as a whole was devoting sufficient time and attention to public information.

Eight field office managers gave us examples of how the decline in field representatives and field office time spent on public information has adversely affected service to the public. Two stated that they now turn down requests for speeches, and one said that his office has discontinued its quarterly preretirement seminars. Several said that their community outreach activities had declined. Although only two field office managers said that they needed more field representatives on their staffs, most said they would not request more field representatives only because they had a greater need for other positions, such as claims representatives.

Six managers said that SSA as a whole needs to devote more time and attention to public information activities. Several of them questioned the effectiveness of SSA's national public information campaigns, including the Advertising Council campaign. Others said that even though the Office of Information is sending them much better materials than it did in the past, their staffs still do not have enough time to make full use of these materials, thereby negating the effectiveness of these improvements.

¹A voluntary, nonprofit organization of advertising agencies that conducts public service information campaigns.

Surveys of Public

Surveys by the American Council of Life Insurance and the Home Testing Institute show consistent results about changes in the public's confidence in SSA programs but inconsistent results about changes in the public's knowledge about SSA programs.

Both the Council and Institute surveys show that public confidence in social security is increasing. Council statistics show that public confidence in social security has increased steadily since 1984. Persons who rated themselves as confident about the future of social security increased from 32 percent in 1984 to 49 percent in 1988. The biggest increase occurred since 1986, when 39 percent rated themselves as confident about social security. The Home Testing Institute surveyed households in the United States in December 1987 and November 1988. Persons rating themselves as confident about the future of social security increased from 47 percent in 1987 to 57 percent in 1988.

The Council and Institute surveys differ, however, on whether public knowledge about social security is improving. Council statistics show public knowledge to be steadily declining since 1984. In 1984, 60 percent of persons sampled rated themselves as well informed about social security; in 1988, only 52 percent did. However, the Institute surveys show the percentage of people rating themselves as well informed about social security increasing from 64 percent in 1987 to 68 percent in 1988.

Waiting Times in SSA Field Offices

In response to criticisms by GAO and the Congress of its original methodology, SSA has changed its method of measuring how long the public waits to be served in SSA field offices. In two 1987 reports, GAO identified weaknesses in SSA's original waiting time study. It did not measure total waiting time in SSA field offices and was being manipulated by field offices, many of which changed their procedures to reduce waiting times during the study period.¹ In its June 1988 report on HHS' appropriation, the Senate Appropriations Committee stated that it expected SSA to develop an alternative method for collecting accurate waiting time data in SSA field offices. We believe the changes made by SSA represent an improvement over the old methodology.

The details of the change in methodology are described in SSA's March 1989 report on service quality submitted to your Committees. In revising its methodology, SSA used a study design based on manual self-reporting by SSA district offices. SSA did not consider using automated means of measuring waiting times, such as time clocks. SSA officials felt that such techniques would be costly and still would not preclude manipulation by field office personnel. In summary, the following changes went into effect on September 30, 1988.

- The new study measures the time a client waits to see the receptionist ("prereception waiting time"), as well as the time he waits to be interviewed after he sees the receptionist ("interview waiting time"). The original study captured only "interview waiting time."
- The new study measures the actual time clients wait in speed lines and includes this time in its calculation of average prereception waiting time. Speed lines are designated locations or stations set up in a field office to serve clients whose visits can be handled quickly. The original study assumed that no waiting time occurred in speed lines, although the speed line client was included in the sample when average waiting time was calculated. As a result, the overall average waiting time that SSA reported was reduced.
- The new study requires each office to collect data for approximately 3 hours about once every 20 months and report the results. Only 5 percent of field offices participate in the new waiting time study each month. The old study required all offices to collect data for 30 minutes each week.

¹Social Security: Staff Reductions and Service Quality (GAO/HRD-87-66, Mar. 10, 1987, and GAO/HRD-87-139BR, Sept. 17, 1987).

- The new study provides statistically valid data quarterly on a national basis only. The original study was designed to provide weekly data that were statistically valid at the regional office as well as national level.²

The average waiting time as measured by the new study is much longer than the last reported average waiting time measured by the original study method. Study results based on the original method had shown in general that waiting times were steadily declining—from 12.3 minutes in March 1986 to 4.6 minutes in September 1988. The new study shows a total average waiting time of 19 minutes for the quarter ending December 1988, including an average prereception waiting time of 7 minutes and an average interview waiting time of 12 minutes.

SSA headquarters officials believe that the new study approach provides a better measure of waiting times. Regional office officials and field office managers and employees whom we interviewed agreed. All 10 field office managers we interviewed, who have participated in the new study, and 9 of 10 regional officials stated that the new study reduces the incentive for field office managers to manipulate the study results. Because field offices participate in the new study much less frequently than they did in the earlier study, field office managers were no longer concerned about regional management using the waiting time study results to evaluate their performance. They believed that their regions would not view a once-in-20-month occurrence as a valid measure of their performance. They also stated that they received less pressure from regional management about their performance on the new study. No field office manager indicated that a regional official had questioned him about the study results for his office.

Most regional officials reported that their regions took action to reduce field managers' concern that their performances would be evaluated based on waiting time study results. Eight regions stated that waiting time study results were not a factor in evaluating their field office managers' performance under merit pay. Five of these regions said they had removed waiting times as a performance indicator from managers' merit pay plans for fiscal year 1989.

Finally, no field office employees that we interviewed reported that the study results were being manipulated in their offices. All those who

²The average waiting time under the original methodology was estimated to be 95-percent reliable, with a variability of plus or minus 0.2 minutes. The new waiting time study is estimated to be 95-percent reliable, with a variability of plus or minus 1.7 minutes for prereception time and plus or minus 1.3 minutes for interview waiting time.

Appendix V
Waiting Times in SSA Field Offices

served as the receptionist during the waiting time study stated that their offices followed their normal operating procedures during the study. They said that their office neither employed extra interviewers during the study nor interviewed people who arrived during the study time period ahead of people who had already been waiting. They also said that no office manager or supervisor exerted pressure on employees to work faster during the study. In earlier reports GAO found some offices engaging in these practices in order to reduce waiting times of people being measured during the study period.

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