



SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Better Planning Needed to Improve Service Delivery

Highlights of [GAO-10-586T](#), a report to Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Social Security

Why GAO Did This Study

Millions of people rely on the services of Social Security Administration (SSA) field offices. In fiscal year 2009, SSA's approximately 1,300 field offices provided service to a record 45.1 million customers. People visit field offices to apply for Social Security cards, apply for retirement and disability benefits, request replacement benefit checks, and a host of other services. Over the last several years, growing workloads have challenged field offices' ability to manage work while continuing to deliver quality customer service.

The Subcommittee asked GAO to discuss our January 2009 report on SSA field office service delivery challenges. Specifically, this testimony will discuss (1) the state of SSA field office operations, and (2) the status of SSA's efforts to develop a plan to address future service delivery challenges.

To respond to the request, GAO relied primarily on the January 2009 report titled *Social Security Administration: Service Delivery Plan Needed to Address Baby Boom Retirement Challenges* (GAO-09-24, Jan. 2009), and updated it with additional information provided by SSA. In that report, GAO recommended that SSA develop a service delivery plan that explains how it will deliver quality service while managing growing work demands. SSA agreed to develop a document that describes service delivery and staffing plans. No new recommendations are being made in this testimony.

[View GAO-10-586T or key components.](#)
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What GAO Found

Since we last examined service at SSA field offices, SSA has expanded the level of staffing, and encouraged greater use of automated services. However, rapidly rising workloads have adversely affected customer service and the quality of some work, despite SSA's efforts. Recent hiring by SSA nearly restored field offices to their fiscal year 2005 level, but field offices have experienced rapid growth in their retirement and disability claims workloads. SSA used various strategies to manage the growing workload, including deferring some reviews of beneficiaries' continuing eligibility. However, deferring these reviews means that beneficiaries who no longer qualify for benefits may still receive payments erroneously. Key customer service indicators were also affected. In fiscal year 2009, more than 3 million customers waited over 1 hour to be served. Further, SSA's Field Office Caller Survey found that 58 percent of customers calling selected field offices had at least one earlier call that had gone unanswered, but for methodological reasons, the unanswered call rate was likely even higher.

End of Fiscal Year Field Office Staffing and Work Completed, Fiscal Years 2005-2009

Fiscal year	Total number of SSA employees	Number of field office employees	Field office work (in work units)	Work units per employee
2005	65,122	28,790	37.1	1,289
2006	63,054	27,383	37.0	1,350
2007	61,594	26,743	36.2	1,352
2008	63,202	27,534	36.5	1,327
2009	66,459	28,656	37.9	1,322
Percent change, 2005-2009	2.1%	-0.5%	2.1%	2.6%

SSA has not yet offered a plan to detail how it will address future service delivery challenges as GAO recommended in January 2009. With projected increases to SSA's workload from retirement and disability filings from the nation's baby boom generation, and a continued wave of retirements of experienced staff, the need for such a plan is greater than ever. SSA estimates about a 14 percent rise in Old-Age and Survivors Insurance, Disability Insurance (Disability), and Supplemental Security Income claims over the next 10 years, rising from a combined total of 9.4 million, in fiscal year 2008 to 10.7 million in fiscal year 2017. In addition, based on SSA's projections, 41 percent of the current workforce will retire by fiscal year 2018. With such challenges, it is critical for SSA to develop a plan to discuss how it will address future challenges. SSA officials did not provide GAO with an update on where the agency stood in developing such a plan.