



Highlights of [GAO-09-24](#), a report to the Committee on Finance, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Millions of people rely on the services of Social Security Administration (SSA) field offices. In fiscal year 2008, SSA's approximately 1,300 field offices provided service to about 44 million customers. People visit field offices to apply for Social Security cards, apply for retirement and disability benefits, establish direct deposit, and a host of other services. Over the last several years, staffing reductions have challenged field offices' ability to manage work while continuing to deliver quality customer service.

To better understand the challenges SSA faces in delivering quality customer service, GAO was asked to determine (1) the effect that staffing reductions are having on field office operations and (2) the challenges SSA faces in meeting service delivery needs in the future and the agency's plan for addressing them.

In May 2008, GAO reported initial observations on the effects of reduced staff levels. To conduct this work, GAO interviewed SSA headquarters and field officials and analyzed various data on SSA's workloads and customer service.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that SSA develop a service delivery plan that outlines how it will deliver quality service while managing growing work demands and constrained resources. In response, SSA stated that it has intensive planning efforts in place, but agreed to develop a single planning document that describes service delivery and staffing plans.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-09-24](#). For more information, contact Barbara Bovbjerg at 202-512-7215 or bovbjergb@gao.gov.

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Service Delivery Plan Needed to Address Baby Boom Retirement Challenges

What GAO Found

Staffing constraints are having adverse effects on field office services. The number of staff in field offices dropped 4.4 percent from 2005 to 2008, as shown in the table below. As a result of greater efficiencies, field office work produced fell only 1.3 percent during the same period. To manage the reduced staffing, SSA deferred work deemed as a lower priority, such as conducting reviews of beneficiaries' continuing eligibility. However, deferring these reviews means that beneficiaries who no longer qualify for benefits may still receive payments erroneously. Reduced staffing also impacted key customer service indicators. In fiscal year 2007, more than 3 million customers waited for over 1 hour to be served. Further, SSA's Field Office Caller Survey found that 51 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. These factors may have contributed to a 3 percent drop in SSA's overall customer satisfaction rating from 84 percent in fiscal year 2005 to 81 percent in fiscal year 2008.

End of Year Field Office Staffing and Work Completed, Fiscal Years 2005–2008

Fiscal year	End of year number of field office employees	Work productivity (in work units)	Work productivity units completed per employee
2005	28,790	37.1 million	1,289
2006	27,383	37.0 million	1,350
2007	26,743	36.2 million	1,352
2008	27,534	36.6 million	1,327
Percent change, 2005–2008	-4.4 %	-1.3 %	+2.9 %

Source: GAO analysis of SSA staffing and workload data.

Increases in retirement and disability filings and a significant retirement wave of SSA's most experienced staff pose difficult challenges for SSA in meeting future service delivery needs. SSA estimates that retirement and disability filings will increase the agency's work by about 1 million annual claims by 2017. Further, SSA will experience an agency-wide retirement wave in the coming years—the agency projects that 44 percent of its staff will retire by 2016. SSA published its new strategic plan in September 2008, which calls for SSA to eliminate the backlog of disability hearings and increase online retirement filings to 50 percent of applications. While discussing the plan with us, SSA officials noted that it is not intended to be a service delivery plan detailing how the agency will address the service needs of the retiring baby boom generation. While the plan includes the goal of significantly expanding the use of electronic services, it is not clear how this will mitigate the increasing SSA workload.