

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-597](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Social Security, Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

SSA has one of the largest physical footprints of any federal agency. It has about 1,500 facilities nationwide, including field offices where customers can meet with SSA staff to apply for benefits and conduct other business. SSA is re-examining its footprint in light of expanding online and other remote service options and a 2012 government-wide initiative to make more efficient use of physical space. GAO was asked to examine SSA's changing footprint and service delivery.

This report (1) describes the trends in SSA's physical footprint and service delivery, (2) assesses the steps SSA is taking to reconfigure its footprint, and (3) assesses the steps SSA is taking to address any challenges to expanding remote service delivery. GAO reviewed SSA documents and data on facilities and service delivery for fiscal years 2006 to 2016; interviewed officials from SSA and other federal agencies; and visited SSA facilities in four states, chosen for diversity in geographic location, visitor to staff ratio, and proportion of local residents with Internet access, among other factors.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations, including that SSA develop a facility plan for reconfiguring its footprint as it expands remote service delivery, track staff follow-ups of online applications, and develop performance goals for alternate service approaches. SSA agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-17-597](#). For more information, contact Barbara Bovbjerg at (202) 512-7215 or [bovbjergb@gao.gov](mailto:bovbjergb@gao.gov) or David Wise at (202) 512-2834 or [wised@gao.gov](mailto:wised@gao.gov).

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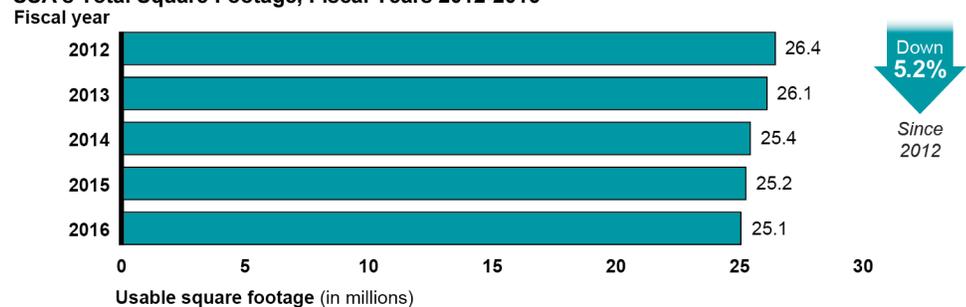
## SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

# Improvements Needed in Facilities Planning and Service Delivery Evaluation

## What GAO Found

The Social Security Administration (SSA) has reduced its physical footprint and expanded delivery of services remotely, including online. SSA reduced the total square footage of its facilities by about 1.4 million square feet (or about 5 percent) from fiscal years 2012 to 2016, according to GAO's analysis, by applying new standards for determining the size of offices and consolidating facilities (see figure). SSA has also expanded the services it offers remotely, and online use has increased for certain services such as disability and retirement applications. Despite this increase, in-person contacts at field offices have not changed substantially, with about the same number in fiscal year 2016 as in fiscal year 2007 (approximately 43 million). This may be due to growing demand for services as well as certain services not yet being fully available online.

SSA's Total Square Footage, Fiscal Years 2012-2016



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Social Security Administration (SSA) data. | GAO-17-597

SSA's steps to reconfigure its footprint do not fully incorporate changes in service delivery, such as the expansion of remote service delivery. As mentioned above, SSA has been expanding the services it delivers online. While SSA has a strategic goal of re-thinking its footprint as it expands remote service delivery, it lacks a facility plan that links to this goal, as called for by facility planning criteria. Without a plan that considers the increasing use of online services and wide variation in online service use across field offices, SSA may miss opportunities to further reduce its footprint.

SSA is taking steps to make remote services easier to use, for example by adding new features to its website and offering alternate approaches for accessing services, but does not consistently evaluate them, which could limit its ability to shift more services online and further reconfigure its footprint. For example, SSA has added features allowing online customers to interact directly with SSA staff. However, SSA does not track staff follow-ups to deal with any errors in online benefit applications in order to improve them, as called for by federal internal control standards. To enhance access to remote services, SSA has introduced alternate service approaches such as videoconferencing in third-party sites; however, it does not have performance goals for these approaches. GAO has previously identified performance goals as a best practice, which may help agencies improve their customer service.