

The Social Security Administration's Telework Program and Its Effect on Customer Service

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To answer specific questions from the Chairman, House of Representatives, Social Security Subcommittee, regarding the Social Security Administration's (SSA) telework program and its effect on customer service.

Background

In November 2013, SSA agreed with the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) to Article 41, *Telework*, of the SSA/AFGE National Agreement. Article 41 established a uniform telework program that permits eligible AFGE bargaining unit employees to perform Agency-assigned work at a management-approved alternate duty station. Article 41 provided employees in SSA field offices (FO) and teleservice centers (TSC) the opportunity to participate in telework. Before implementing this program nationwide, SSA began a pilot program to determine whether it can successfully use telework in its front-line service positions.

SSA's Office of Disability Adjudication and Review (ODAR) has hearing offices nationwide where administrative law judges (ALJ) conduct hearings and decide on appealed claims. ODAR's ALJs and staff participated in telework under SSA's Flexiplace program before Article 41 was implemented.

Findings

SSA did not restrict specific FO and TSC job positions from participating in its telework pilot. However, SSA limited the number of FOs, TSCs, and employees that could participate in the pilot. When SSA began the FO telework pilot in December 2013, it restricted telework to 1 day per 2-week pay period. SSA subsequently increased FO telework to 1 day a week. The TSC telework pilot began in September 2015, and employees were eligible to telework 1 day a week. For hearing offices, SSA restricted only the contact representative position from participating in telework. Hearing office staff could telework up to 3 days per week; some decision writers could telework 4 days a week; and ALJs could telework up to 8 days per month, with the expectation of scheduling, on average, 50 hearings per month. Generally, FO, TSC, and hearing office staff could perform most of their duties while teleworking.

As of January 2017,

- 4,526 (16 percent) of the 27,530 FO employees were participating in the telework pilot at 317 (26 percent) of the 1,213 FOs;
- 831 (19 percent) of the 4,298 TSC employees were teleworking at 17 (68 percent) of the 25 TSCs; and
- 5,541 (64 percent) of the 8,725 hearing office employees were teleworking across all 164 hearing offices, National Case Assistance Centers, and National Hearing Centers.

SSA's management information showed that teleworking FOs performed slightly less as well as the non-teleworking FOs while TSC teleworking staff performed slightly better than non-teleworking staff. Finally, as the number of hearing office teleworkers increased, hearing office productivity declined in three of the four metrics ODAR monitored. SSA explained that multiple factors affect productivity, regardless of telework.

SSA managers and staff recognized various telework challenges, and SSA told us it was working to resolve them. SSA needs to establish a business plan that monitors telework productivity to ensure it will timely identify and correct trends that may negatively affect customer service.