

Customer Wait Times in the Social Security Administration's Field Offices and Card Centers 152307



May 2024

Office of Audit Report Summary

Objectives

Our objective was to observe customer wait times in select Social Security Administration (SSA) field offices (FO) and Social Security Card Centers (SSCC). In addition, we determined the (1) factors that may affect customer wait times and (2) steps SSA took to reduce wait times.

Background

SSA administers its programs and operations through a network of over 1,200 FOs that serve the public. FOs are SSA's primary point of face-to-face contact with the public.

On March 17, 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, SSA began limiting in-person services in FOs and requiring appointments for limited services. SSA redirected the majority of customers to online and telephone service channels.

On April 7, 2022, SSA restored in-person services in its FOs and SSCCs. Media outlets began reporting that some office visitors were waiting outside for several hours.

In February and March 2023, we visited 76 FOs and SSCCs. During these visits, we observed customer wait times and interviewed office management regarding best practices for reducing customer wait times. We also interviewed SSA staff to determine Agency initiatives to enhance the customer experience and reduce wait times.

Results

During our office visits, we observed the wait times of customers throughout their visit for services. For the 76 FOs and SSCCs we visited, we observed the average wait time for customers before check-in ranged from 5 to 12 minutes, depending on the method of check-in. The check-in method(s) used varied, based on management's discretion. Once checked in, customers waited an average of 32 to 45 minutes to receive services. We do not assert, and the reader should not infer, that our observations during our visits represent all SSA offices.

We noted five factors that may affect customer wait times: number of customers; the check-in process; staffing; appointments; and the availability of telephone and online services.

SSA has implemented, or is implementing, initiatives aimed at reducing customer wait times in its offices, including: mobile check-in, installing new and updated self-check-in kiosks, and the availability to upload documents remotely. While SSA has developed many initiatives, it has not developed processes to measure the effectiveness of reducing customer wait times in its offices.

SSA did not set goals specific to wait times for customers in the office or the time customers must wait for scheduled appointments. Without goals, we believe there is a risk of SSA customers experiencing prolonged wait times in receiving service when visiting offices or through scheduled appointments.

Recommendations

We recommend SSA:

1. Develop and/or enhance systems to capture data that measure the effectiveness of initiatives to reduce customer wait times.
2. Develop goals specific to wait times for customers in the office and time customers wait for scheduled appointments.

SSA agreed with Recommendation 1 and partially agreed with Recommendation 2.