

The Social Security Administration's Telephone Service Performance

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To review the Social Security Administration's (SSA) telephone services, especially as they relate to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background

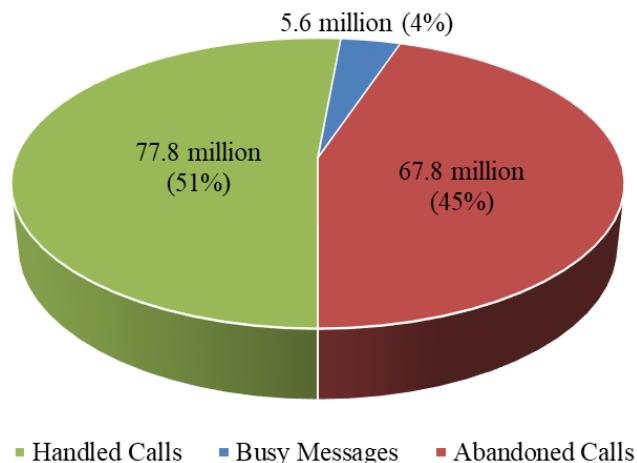
On July 21, 2020, John Larson, Chair, and Tom Reed, Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Social Security, requested we answer a series of questions related to SSA's telephone services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For this review, we obtained SSA's telephone service data for Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 (October 1, 2019 to September 30, 2020). We compared SSA's performance data from October 2019 through March 2020 with the data from April through September 2020, when SSA limited in-person service. We also compared SSA's FY 2020 performance to other Federal agencies' and industry performance and to SSA's telephone service performance in FYs 2010 through 2019. In addition, we obtained information on changes in staffing and workloads, including steps SSA took to strengthen telephone services and better track and evaluate callers' experience and satisfaction in FY 2020. Finally, we identified changes SSA made in response to COVID-19, their effect on telephone performance metrics and customer service, and lessons SSA learned during COVID-19 related to telephone services.

Results

In FY 2020, SSA received over 151 million calls at its field offices and the national 800-number. SSA handled over half of those calls through a combination of calls answered by SSA employees and addressed by automated services.

Calls SSA Received in FY 2020



■ Handled Calls ■ Busy Messages ■ Abandoned Calls

SSA's telephone services shifted to more calls to field offices in FY 2020 when the Agency limited in-person service and provided the public with more field office telephone numbers. The increase in field office calls resulted in increased busy messages and wait times toward the end of FY 2020. SSA adjusted national 800-number operations during the pandemic to reduce wait times and the number of callers who received a busy message. National 800-number performance began to decline toward the end of the FY, though it was still better than pre-pandemic performance.

When comparing SSA to 13 customer service call centers from 10 other Federal agencies, SSA had a higher call volume in FY 2020 with similar or better performance.

To reduce wait times, improve caller experience, and ensure more calls are handled, SSA hired additional 800-number staff, modified automated service options, and plans to implement a new telephone system.