

Controls over the Social Security Administration's National 800-number Service During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) had and used management controls over the service its 800-number employees provided callers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background

SSA's national 800-number allows SSA beneficiaries and the public to speak directly with Social Security representatives or use automated service options. Representatives are available to answer calls Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. local time to the caller. The automated services are available 24 hours a day.

In response to the pandemic, SSA limited in-person field office services and redirected customers to online and telephone service channels from March 2020 through April 2022. Most SSA employees, including 800-number employees, worked virtually during this period. While SSA began reopening its offices to the public in April 2022, it continues encouraging the public to use its online and telephone service options and rely on SSA's telephone services as a primary service channel.

Results

SSA had management controls in place over the service 800-number employees provided during the pandemic. However, two of the three controls were not effectively employed, and the third control did not ensure 800-number callers' requests were resolved timely and accurately.

- **Service Observations** – SSA management continued reviewing calls answered by 800-number employees during the pandemic, either through recorded calls or live observations. However, it did not meet its goal of conducting a monthly minimum of three service observations per employee for any month during the pandemic. Managers not completing the required number of service observations limited SSA's opportunity to monitor employees and improve the quality of service the Agency provides the public via its 800-number.
- **Speech Analytics** – During the pandemic, SSA did not always timely intervene with 800-number employees identified through speech analytics as providing problematic service to callers.
- **Modernized Development Worksheets (MDW)** – SSA employees use MDWs to transfer requests for needed actions between its components. SSA employees in other components were able to close MDWs created by 800-number employees in response to requests by 800-number callers without taking the requested actions, resulting in some callers making repeated calls to the 800-number to resolve the same issues.

These controls were in place before the pandemic, and SSA continued their use during the pandemic. Per SSA, service changes made in response to the pandemic initially limited some control efforts, including completing the targeted number of service observations.

Recommendations

We recommended SSA (1) create a performance standard requiring employees who conduct service observations to conduct a minimum of three service observations, as required by SSA policy, and (2) create policy to ensure all problematic calls identified through speech analytics are referred for regional management and regional management intervenes within defined timeframes. SSA disagreed with our recommendations.