

Comparing the Social Security Administration's Workload Statistics During the COVID-19 Pandemic to Prior Years

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To summarize information about the Social Security Administration's (SSA) workloads during the COVID-19 pandemic period of April 2020 to March 2021 and compare it to Agency workloads in prior years.

Background

Each year, SSA receives and processes millions of claims and post-entitlement reviews. These workloads, which are addressed by SSA's nationwide network of field offices, teleservice centers, and processing centers, were significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic. On March 17, 2020, SSA began limiting in-person services and redirecting customers to online and telephone service channels.

From SSA's management information systems, we obtained workload information for Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance (OASDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) claims and post-entitlement workloads including continuing disability reviews (CDR), SSI redeterminations, and limited issue cases (development of a specific issue or event without conducting a redetermination).

Results

Overall, SSA received and processed fewer OASDI and SSI claims during the COVID-19 period of April 2020 to March 2021 compared to the prior-year period (April 2019 to March 2020). At the same time, pending levels for these workloads increased. In April 2021, SSA's Commissioner reported that bottlenecks and service deterioration occurred because of the abrupt changes in SSA's operations.

SSI claims for aged applicants had the most significant changes, with 24.3 percent fewer receipts, 25.6 percent fewer claims processed, and 27.8 percent more pending claims. In addition, SSA received 15.2 percent fewer SSI disability claims and processed 12.5 percent fewer claims. To address the decline in SSI receipts, in June 2020, SSA formed a workgroup to work closely with other Federal, State, and local government agencies and third-party organizations to reach at-risk persons, including individuals facing homelessness or having low income, limited English proficiency, or mental illness.

SSA processed 9.8 percent fewer SSI redeterminations and limited issue cases and 41.2 percent fewer full medical CDRs compared to the year before the pandemic. This occurred because, from March 17 through August 31, 2020, SSA temporarily suspended the medical CDR workload and deferred processing actions that would have resulted in a reduction, suspension, or termination of benefits. SSA stated it was also affected by reduced availability of medical providers and consultative examinations at disability determination services along with delays in mail and document processing. While pending levels for SSI redeterminations and limited issue cases decreased 5.9 percent, the reduction in full medical CDRs resulted in the recurrence of a backlog that had been eliminated since September 2018.

We plan to conduct an additional review to determine why pending levels increased while receipts decreased for some SSA workloads in the COVID-19 period compared to prior years. We will also identify best practices from SSA's outreach efforts to inform certain individuals about their potential eligibility for SSI and methods to apply.