



Office of the Inspector General
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Audit Report

The Social Security
Administration's Telephone
Service Disruptions

CONTAINS REDACTED INFORMATION

A-05-22-51149 | June 2023



Office of the Inspector General
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

MEMORANDUM

Date: June 15, 2023

Refer To: A-05-22-51149

To: Kilolo Kijakazi
Acting Commissioner

From: Gail S. Ennis *Gail S. Ennis*
Inspector General

Subject: The Social Security Administration's Telephone Service Disruptions

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The attached final report presents the results of the Office of Audit's review. The objectives were to determine the extent of the disruptions to the Social Security Administration's telephone services and their impact on the public.

If you wish to discuss the final report, please call me or have your staff contact Michelle L. Anderson, Assistant Inspector General for Audit.

Attachment

The Social Security Administration's Telephone Service Disruptions

A-05-22-51149



June 2023

Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To determine the extent of the disruptions to the Social Security Administration's (SSA) telephone services and their impact on the public.

Background

SSA has, for many years, operated three telephone systems for its national 800-number, field offices, and Headquarters. SSA plans to replace these systems with a modern, unified telephone system through its Next Generation Telephony Project (NGTP). NGTP is expected to improve telephone customer service by merging SSA's three telephone systems into a single, uniform platform designed to be more efficient, stable, and functional. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic delayed this upgrade.

In March 2020, when SSA limited in-person field office service, the telephone became the primary option for the public to interact with SSA employees. To accommodate remote operations, SSA implemented temporary workarounds to its legacy telephone systems that modified functionality and capacity. SSA experienced service disruptions while it was operating under the temporary Unification platform. SSA began implementing its new Unification platform in May 2021 and experienced additional service disruptions during the initial attempt at transition to the NGTP.

Results

SSA's telephone systems experienced an increasing number of service disruptions at the end of 2022 as it maintained operations under the temporary Unification platform. From May 2021 through December 2022, 40 telephone service disruptions occurred on the national 800-number and field office systems. The majority of these disruptions occurred from October through December 2022 and involved the 800-number. These disruptions resulted in dropped calls, increased wait times and, in some instances, unavailable automated services. Wait times increased as SSA employees could not take calls during several of the outages. Further, such functionalities as the "estimated wait time" and the "call back assist" features, which callers used to avoid waiting on the telephone to speak with an SSA employee, were no longer available to callers. The rate of unanswered calls for those who opted to speak with an employee during each of the service disruptions ranged from 32 to as high as 80 percent.

As of May 2023, SSA still had not implemented the NGTP but strengthened its temporary platform to help increase stability until NGTP can be implemented. However, under the Unification platform, SSA does not have a Service Level Agreement in place with the telephone service contractor and does not have plans to implement one. Based on this information, we asked SSA whether it should put a Service Level Agreement in place, but according to SSA:

"... adding [a Service Level Agreement] to the existing Unification Task Order would require additional negotiations with the vendor and a bilateral agreement to 'implement' them. Since [SSA does] not plan to upgrade Unification, [it does] not plan on reopening negotiations with [the vendor] over Unification. Moreover, because [SSA] [has] unsuccessfully sought to negotiate with [the vendor] to include performance based incentives to [the vendor] in the past, we do not believe [it] would agree to a bilateral modification implementing [a Service Level Agreement]."

SSA stated it has worked steadily to improve the stability of its temporary solution and plans to implement the NGTP platform for the national 800-number by the end of FY 2023. However, SSA still needs to set a goal for completion of the final stages of the NGTP, including adding the field office and Headquarters telephone systems to operate under a single platform.

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ABBREVIATIONS

C.F.R.	Code of Federal Regulations
FO	Field Office
FY	Fiscal Year
IVR	Interactive Voice Response
NGTP	Next Generation Telephony Project
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
OQR	Office of Quality Review
SSA	Social Security Administration
TSRP	Telephone System Replacement Project

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OBJECTIVE

Our objective was to determine the extent of the disruptions to the Social Security Administration's (SSA) telephone services and their impact on the public.

BACKGROUND

SSA's telephone services are an essential way for the public to obtain information and assistance with benefits, Social Security numbers, and other vital services. SSA's telephone services consist of a national 800-number and a network of approximately 1,200 field offices (FO). SSA's 24 teleservice centers are responsible for answering calls to the national 800-number. When the call volume at SSA's national 800-number is high, processing center employees assist in answering calls.

As noted in an April 2021 report, when SSA limited in-person FO service in March 2020, the telephone became the primary option for the public to interact with SSA employees.¹ For many years, SSA has operated three separate legacy telephone systems for its national 800-number, FOs, and Headquarters. When SSA directed its employees to work from home in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, SSA did not have equipment for all workers to perform their duties from telework locations and could not obtain enough equipment for all national 800-number employees to telework under the legacy telephone systems. According to SSA, the manufacturer stopped making the equipment required to support telework. To accommodate remote operations, SSA implemented temporary workarounds to its legacy telephone systems that modified functionality and capacity. In April 2020, SSA began routing calls for the national 800-number to the Telephone System Replacement Project (TSRP) system that regional offices and FOs used. Under this process, employees did not need additional equipment to answer calls remotely. However, according to SSA, this system had limitations that were not sustainable long-term. For instance, it lacked advanced call features and some automated self-service capability. Additionally, SSA lost some functionalities, such as post-call surveys, since that was only a feature in one of the two telephone systems SSA used for the national 800-number.

In a November 2021 report, we stated, "SSA attempted to move the two systems used for the national 800-number to [a] new, unified system."² SSA referred to this system as the Unification platform. The Unification platform was designed to be a temporary solution to move the national 800-number employees to a single telephone platform and be the first step toward completing the Next Generation Telephony Project (NGTP).





¹ SSA, OIG, *The Social Security Administration's Telephone Services During June 2020*, A-05-20-50998, p. 1 (April 2021).

² SSA, OIG, *The Social Security Administration's Telephone Service Performance*, A-05-20-50999, p. 22 (November 2021).

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According to SSA, when fully implemented, NGTP is expected to improve telephone customer service by merging the three legacy systems into a single platform designed to be more efficient, stable, and functional (see Figure 1). However, according to SSA, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic presented unanticipated implementation challenges. According to the Agency, while the NGTP vendor is making progress, it has reported multiple build and testing delays. Additionally, SSA began implementing its temporary, Unification platform in May 2021 and experienced additional service disruptions during the initial attempt to transition to the NGTP. In response, SSA temporarily returned to the operational telephone system used during the pandemic to prevent additional service disruptions.

Figure 1: SSA Pre-COVID, COVID, Unification Platform, and NGTP Telephone System Functionalities and Limitations Comparison

Telephone System	Number of Telephone Systems in Operation	Telework Capable	Queue Capacity	Additional Functionalities	Limitations
Pre-COVID		Only with specialized equipment	11,750 call capacity and based on individual sites for Field Office and Headquarters Telephone Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schedule voice-call back Estimated wait time Allowed better call routing within a single telephone system Post-call surveys 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not enough specialized equipment for telework (only supported 20 percent telework capability without equipment) No adjustable call ceiling Difficulties moving calls to other platforms
COVID	 *Moved TSC employees to FO system	✓	Platform one: 11,750 call capacity Platform two: 9,000 call capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Call routing to TSRP network Telework capability without equipment Additional call queue capacity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only one of the two telephone systems retained the functionalities of the pre-COVID system No post-call surveys
Unification Platform	 *Removed TSC platform that was not telework capable	✓	No capacity, however, after multiple outages SSA initially set the capacity to 12,000 calls in June 2021 and later reduced the capacity to 10,000 in December 2022.	First step toward NGTP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data reporting challenges Employee call connection issues Callers occasionally dropped from queue Schedule voice-call back feature removed No post-call surveys or estimated wait time feature
Next Generation Telephony Project		✓	18,000 queue capacity expected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SSA will be able to bring back the estimated wait time, schedule voice-call back feature, and post-call surveys Increased stability and queue capacity Expanded testing environment to allow more pre-production testing to remedy issues before software is deployed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Call back assist won't be immediately available upon implementation Software to assist SSA employees with retrieving caller identification will not be available due to software compatibility issues

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From 2019 to 2021, calls to both FOs and the national 800-number increased by approximately 55 million calls per year (40 percent).³ Despite the April 7, 2022 resumption of non-appointment services at SSA's offices, the Agency continues encouraging the public to call for help or to schedule an in-person appointment, and many still rely on SSA's telephone services as a primary service channel.⁴

Congressional Request

On May 16, 2022, John Larson and Kevin Hern, who were then the Chair and Acting Ranking Member, respectively, of the Subcommittee on Social Security, requested we answer a series of questions related to recent disruptions to SSA's telephone services.⁵ See Appendix A for the congressional request.

Scope and Methodology

We analyzed SSA's telephone service data for Fiscal Years 2020 through 2022 related to:

- Calls received, answered, in queue, handled by automated services, or dropped.
- What happened when telephone disruptions occurred.
- Whether service disruptions on the national 800-number or FO telephone system affected the volume of calls or employee's ability to timely answer calls.

See Appendix B for additional information on the scope and methodology for this review.

RESULTS OF REVIEW

SSA's telephone systems experienced an increasing number of service disruptions at the end of 2022 as it maintained operations under the temporary Unification platform. From May 2021 through December 2022, the national 800-number and FO systems experienced 40 telephone service disruptions. The majority of these disruptions occurred from October through December 2022 and involved the 800-number. These disruptions caused dropped calls; increased wait times; and, in some instances, unavailable automated services. Wait times increased as SSA employees could not take calls during several of the outages. Further, such functionalities as the "estimated wait time" and "call back assist" features, which callers used to avoid waiting to speak with an SSA employee, were no longer available. The rate of unanswered calls for those who opted to speak with an employee during each of the service disruptions ranged from 32 to as high as 80 percent.

³ SSA, OIG, *The Social Security Administration's Telephone Service Performance*, A-05-20-50999, Appendix F, p. F-1 (November 2021). SSA reported approximately 145 million calls in FY 2019 compared to over 200 million calls in FY 2021.

⁴ SSA, *Contact Social Security by Phone*, ssa.gov/agency/contact/phone (February 21, 2023).

⁵ We issued three reports on telephone service in response to earlier requests from the Subcommittee on Social Security: *The Social Security Administration's Telephone Service Performance*, A-05-20-50999 (November 2021); *The Social Security Administration's Telephone Services During June 2020*, A-05-20-50998 (April 2021); and *The Social Security Administration's Telephone Services*, A-05-20-50899 (May 2020). See Appendix C for more information on these reports.

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As of May 2023, SSA still had not implemented the NGTP, but it strengthened its temporary platform and initiated testing under the national 800-number to help increase stability until NGTP is implemented by the end of the FY. However, under the current Unification platform, SSA does not have a Service Level Agreement in place with the contractor and does not plan to implement one.

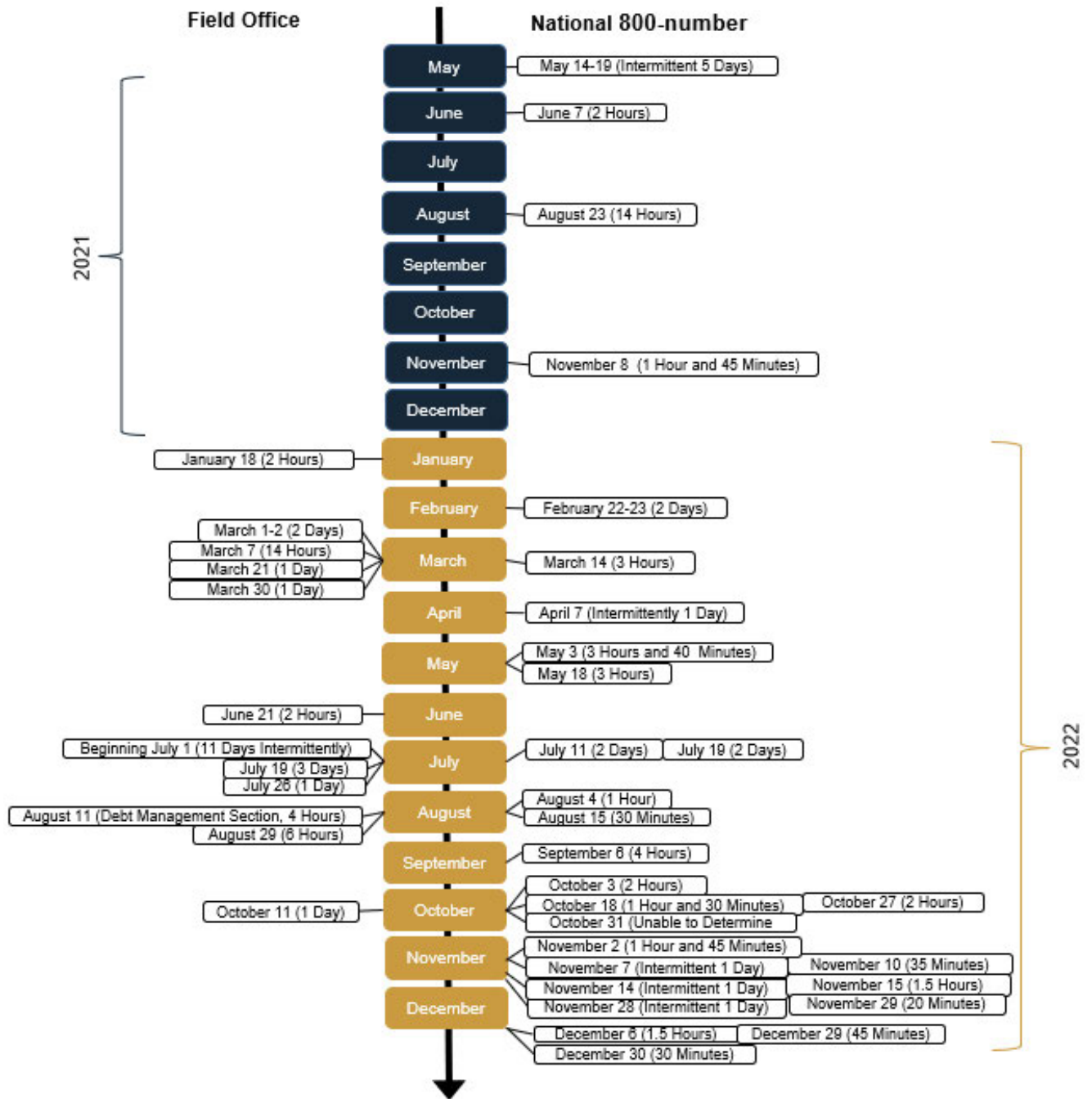
Telephone System Disruptions

From May 2021 to December 2022, SSA experienced 40 telephone service disruptions on the national 800-number and FO telephone systems. The intermittent disruptions varied in duration and affected some, but not always all, employees. According to SSA, before May 2021, service disruptions on its telephone system were rare. The outages on the national 800-number system ranged from intermittent service disruptions during 4 consecutive business days, on May 14 through 19, 2021,⁶ to 20 minutes on November 29, 2022. Some FOs also experienced intermittent interruptions for 11 days in July 2022. However, most of the outages occurred from October to December 2022 and were on SSA's national 800-number. See Figure 2 and Appendix D for all dates, durations, and which telephone system was affected.

⁶ May 15 and 16, 2021 fell on a Saturday and Sunday. During weekends, callers to the national 800-number can use automated services; there were no disruptions to automated services on these dates. During business hours, on weekdays, however, callers have the option to speak to an SSA employee or use automated services.

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Figure 2: Timeline and Duration of Intermittent SSA Telephone Service Disruptions from May 2021 Through December 2022



Notes: The outage on August 11, 2022 only affected incoming calls to SSA’s Debt Management Section and did not impact national 800-number or FO telephone calls. According to SSA, service disruptions, illustrated in chart as intermittent, had service restored during the same business day. Further, some of the dates include weekends, when SSA employees do not handle calls from the public but automated services are available. See Appendix E for the extent, causes, and resolutions of each service disruption.

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The number of disruptions affected the public's ability to conduct business with SSA over the telephone in the following ways:

- Up to 80 percent of, or approximately 314,000, calls went unanswered during some days where service disruptions occurred, which did not include calls that were dropped or who got a busy message.⁷
- SSA could assess the number of calls that went unanswered but did not have the capability to see how many, or which, calls were dropped to follow-up with individuals calling for service during any of the service disruptions, which led to an increase in repeat callers and consequently, busy messages and wait times.
- Some SSA employees could not log into the telephone systems to take calls during the disruptions, which resulted in fewer calls answered and thus, increased wait times for callers in queue to speak with an SSA employee.
- SSA's service on the national 800-number—including automated services—was unavailable during periods of up to 2 days.

See Appendix F for a flowchart of SSA's telephone system, including where call disruptions were occurring during the call. According to SSA's *Fiscal Year 2022 Agency Financial Report*, "The media reported long customer wait times and lines outside of some SSA office buildings where customers were exposed to harsh weather conditions, such as extreme heat. The media further reported that SSA advised people to make appointments for FO visits over the telephone or online, but some customers claimed their attempts to contact SSA to make an appointment were unsuccessful."⁸

Unanswered Calls

The rate of unanswered calls for callers who opted to speak with an SSA employee during each of the service disruptions ranged from 32 percent on September 6, 2022 to as high as 80 percent during the disruption on February 22 and 23, 2022 (see Appendix D). Of the 40 telephone service disruptions, there were 15 disruptions where over 50 percent of calls offered to employees went unanswered during the day(s) of the disruptions.

SSA defines Agent Calls Offered as callers who elect to speak with an SSA employee on the national 800-number and either (1) speak with an employee immediately or (2) enter the queue to speak with an employee when one is available. SSA uses the number of calls offered to employees and calls answered by employees to calculate the Answer Rate. We used this number and rate to determine which callers elected to speak with an employee but whose calls went unanswered during each of SSA's telephone service disruptions. However, this does not include callers who received a busy message or whose calls were dropped before they entered the queue to speak with an employee.

⁷ If a call was dropped, it was disconnected at any point during the call, which could be before or after entering the call queue to speak with an employee or during the call when speaking with an employee.

⁸ SSA, *Fiscal Year 2022 Agency Financial Report*, SSA Publication No. 31-231, pp. 147 and 148 (November 2022).

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As calls to SSA increased, employees handled fewer calls which led to more unanswered calls to the national 800-number. The average number of monthly calls to the national 800-number increased by 27 percent in 2022, from approximately 5.8 million calls in 2021 to 7 million (see Appendix G, Figure G–1 and Table G–1). In contrast, the average monthly calls to the FO decreased by 37 percent, from approximately 11 million calls in 2021 to 7 million in 2022 (see Appendix G, Figure G–1 and Table G–1).⁹ The average monthly calls handled by employees on the national 800-number declined from an average 2.6 million calls in 2021 to 2.2 million calls in 2022 (see Appendix G, Figure G–2 and Table G–2). As calls to FOs declined in 2022, the number of calls handled by employees also decreased. As offices resumed services to the public for non-appointments, customer service in the FOs shifted away from telephones to more in-person service (see Appendix G, Figure G–3 and Table G–3). Thus, the 800-number saw an increase in calls.

Employees could have been handling fewer calls than SSA’s management information reported because, under the Unification platform, a call could be logged as “handled by an employee” without a caller receiving service if the call is immediately dropped. As SSA moved to the Unification platform, the new system only counted callers when they connected with an SSA employee. This differs from the previous telephone system, which counted the end of a call and only recorded the call as “handled by an employee” if it lasted longer than 60 seconds. According to SSA, calls that last fewer than 60 seconds are a small percentage of total calls. Additionally, under the Unification platform, SSA capped the number of callers who could enter into the queue to speak with an employee, which lead to increased busy messages.¹⁰

Calls Abandoned in Queue

A call is “abandoned in queue” if it is offered to an employee, the caller elects to enter the queue, and the caller hangs up while waiting.¹¹ Calls abandoned in queue on the national 800-number were higher at the end of 2021 and remained above 40 percent of calls offered to employees well into 2022 when many of the telephone service disruptions occurred. This resulted in dropped calls and caused more repeat callers that, in turn, increased overall wait times (see Figure 3). Further, statistics on abandoned calls do not count the number of dropped calls before they entered the queue to speak with an SSA employee. As previously noted, SSA did not have a record of these dropped calls. SSA averaged 34 percent of calls abandoned in queue in 2021 compared to 44 percent in 2022.

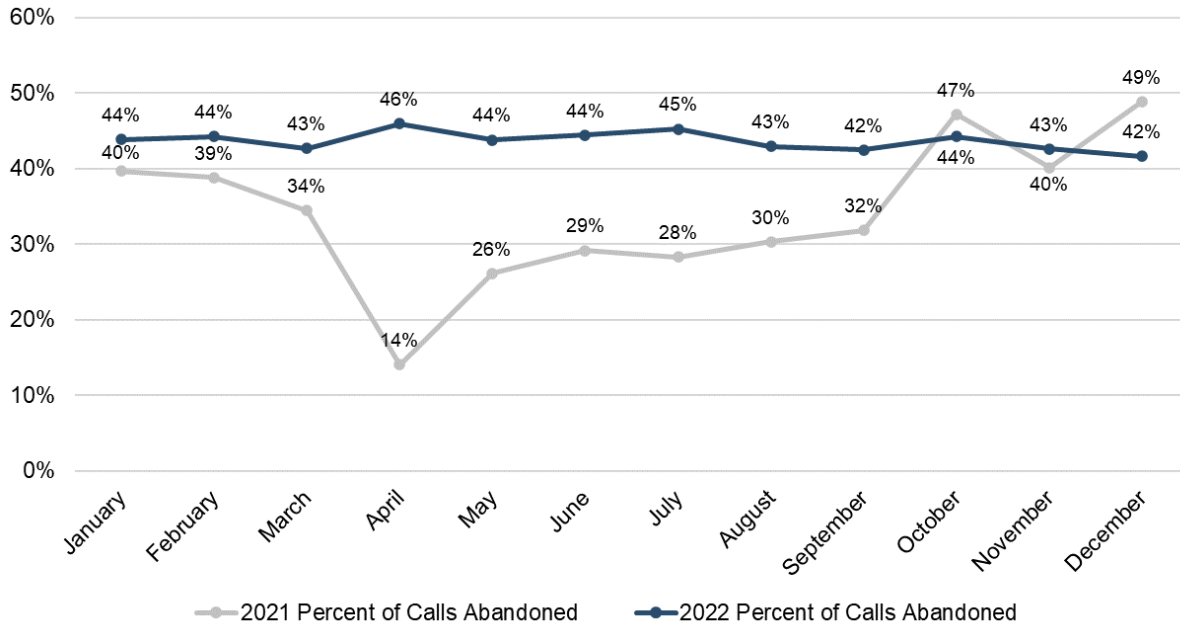
⁹ FOs handled an average of approximately 5 million calls in 2021 compared to an average of approximately 3 million calls in 2022.

¹⁰ SSA capped the number of callers who could enter in queue under the previous telephone platforms to ensure stability (see Figure 1 for more information on the queue capacity for the various telephone systems). However, the Agency did not initially cap the number of callers allowed to enter into the queue under the Unification platform.

¹¹ SSA defines calls offered to employees as “Agent Calls Offered.”

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Figure 3: National 800-number Calls Abandoned in Queue in 2021 and 2022



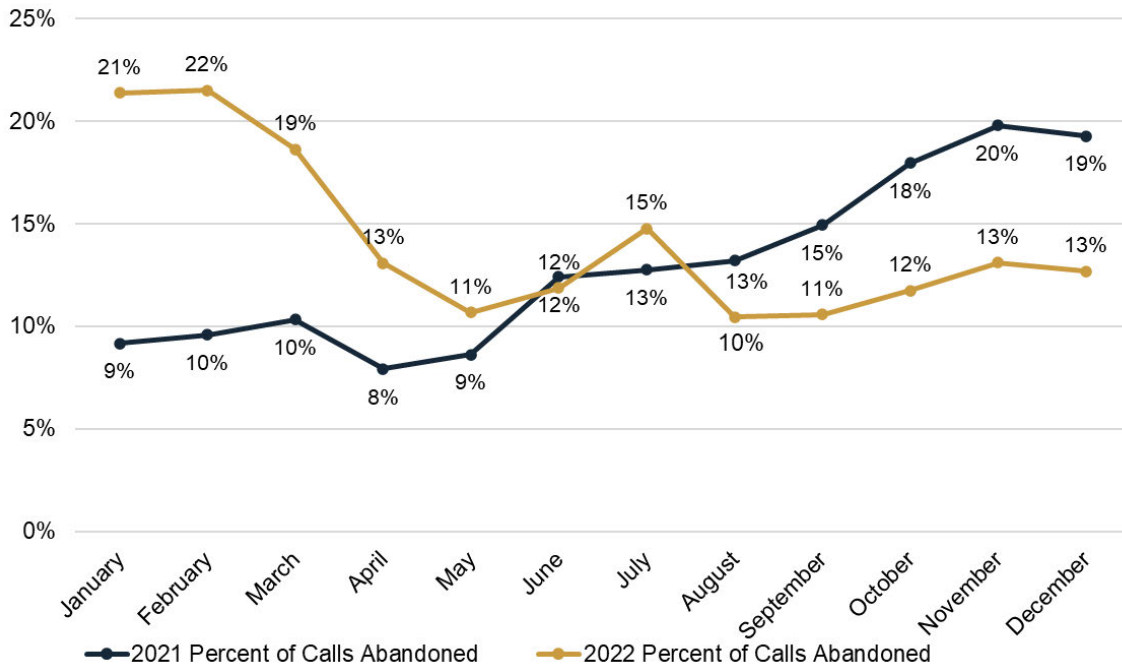
Source: SSA's Office of Customer Service Management Information.

Notes: Because of a system disruption, SSA could not collect telephone service management information for March 11, 2022. We calculated the percentage of calls abandoned in queue based on the number of callers who elected to speak with an employee, which SSA refers to as "Calls Offered." See Appendix G, Table G-6.

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The FOs also experienced a higher rate of calls abandoned in queue toward the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, reaching a peak of 22 percent of calls offered to employees in February 2022 (see Figure 4). However, as SSA resumed non-appointment services in the FOs in April 2022, the FOs received fewer calls and therefore fewer calls were abandoned in queue.

Figure 4: FO Calls Abandoned in Queue in 2021 and 2022



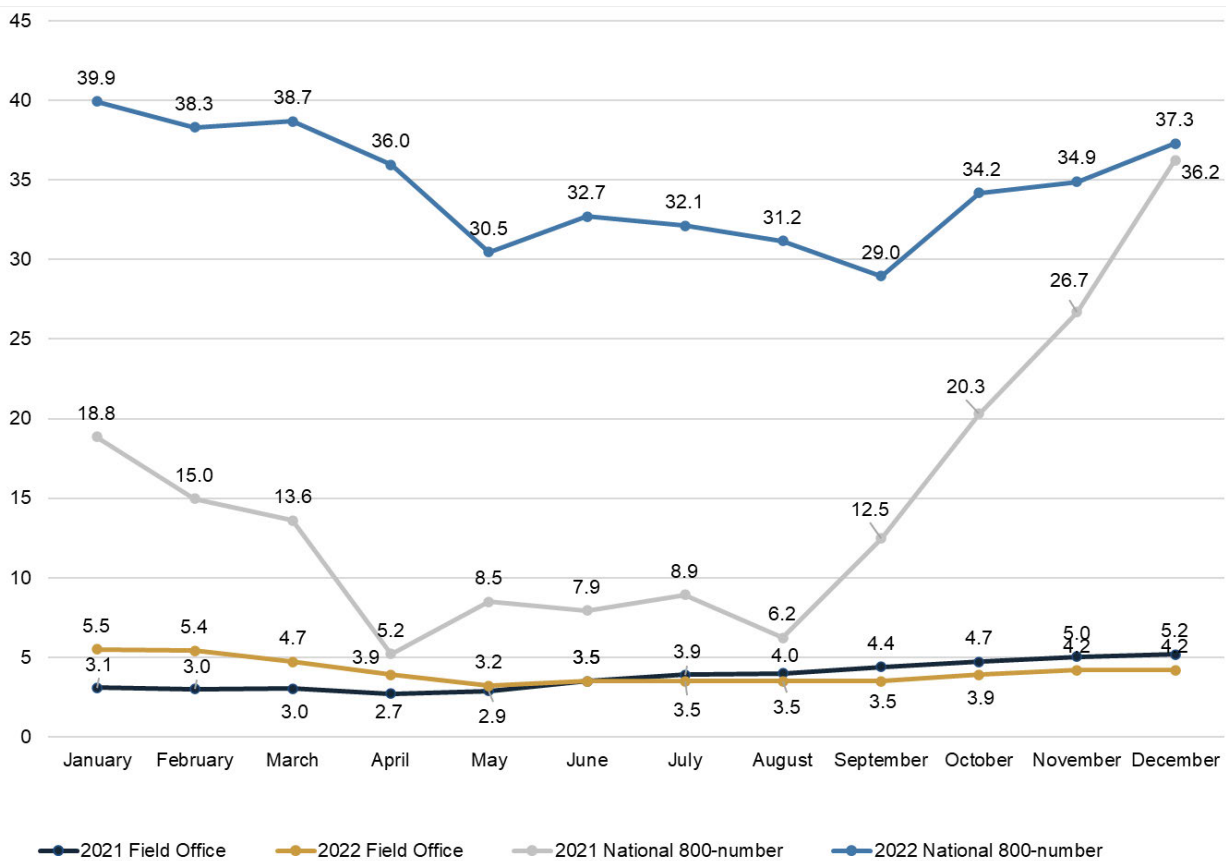
Source: SSA's Office of Customer Service Management Information.

Notes: Because of a system disruption, SSA could not collect telephone service management information for March 11, 2022. We calculated the percentage of calls abandoned in queue based on the number of callers who elected to speak with an employee, which SSA refers to as "Agent Calls Offered." See Appendix G, Table G-7.

Caller Wait Times

As the number of calls increased, employees handled fewer calls and wait times to speak with an employee on the national 800-number increased. Initially, wait times increased to over 25 minutes in November 2021 and peaked to almost 40 minutes in January 2022, with almost 50 percent of callers waiting on hold for longer than 30 minutes. SSA’s average 35-minute wait time for all of 2022 was more than double the 15-minute wait time in 2021. According to SSA, the Agency’s goal was to have a 19-minute wait time at the end of Fiscal Year 2022. FO wait times to speak with an employee increased at the end of 2021 and beginning of 2022 but declined when SSA reopened FOs to the public in April 2022 (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Average Speed of Answer for the National 800-number and FOs in 2021 and 2022



Source: SSA’s Office of Customer Service Management Information.

Note: Because of a system disruption, SSA could not collect telephone service management information for March 11, 2022.

From March 2021 through January 2022, SSA’s Office of Quality Review (OQR) conducted a survey to gauge caller satisfaction with the national 800-number service.¹² The results of the

¹² The survey consisted of live interviews with 300 callers each week and measured satisfaction in three aspects: (1) Overall Service, (2) Ability to Obtain Service, and (3) Agent Courtesy.

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survey noted that, toward the end of the survey period, over 50 percent of callers waited on hold for longer than 30 minutes. OQR recommended the Agency address possible issues with the national 800-number network and/or low staffing levels. Further, the OQR report noted the schedule voice call-back feature was removed from the national 800-number in May 2021, which caused callers to wait on hold longer before they connected to an SSA employee.¹³ Callers used the schedule voice call-back feature to avoid waiting on the telephone for an employee. SSA also lost the Estimated Wait Time feature when it converted to the Unification platform. This feature allowed callers to make an informed decision about whether to wait on hold to speak with an SSA employee. According to SSA, the removal of this feature could account for some of the increase in wait times. SSA expects to make the improvements and restore these features after it completes the transition to the NGTP. Under the Unification platform, SSA cannot bring back these functionalities.

Although wait times for the national 800-number were highest from December 2021 through March 2022, the number of teleservice center employees were at some of the highest levels of the past 6 years, at an average of 91 percent employment, during this time (see Appendix G, Table G–5).¹⁴ However, new employees were in training—not answering calls—and some experienced employees were assisting with training, which, in turn, meant fewer employees were able to take calls during this time, which also contributed to SSA’s ability to timely answer calls during and after the telephone service disruptions. According to SSA, it simplified and expanded the hiring process, which allowed it to onboard more employees, and plans to continue improving the hiring process to allow greater flexibility to hiring staff at a quicker pace. Further, in September 2023, SSA plans to implement a plan to reduce the time it takes for a trainee to independently take calls.¹⁵

Busy Messages During Telephone Service Disruptions

In January 2022, the number of busy messages peaked for both the FO and the national 800-number. While SSA was operating under two telephone platforms for the national 800-number, from April 2020 to May 2021, it could allow more callers to enter the telephone queue without generating busy messages, which led to minimal busy messages during this time (see Appendix G, Table G–8). From May through November 2021, SSA was primarily on one network while it transitioned to the Unification platform. During that time, when there was a service disruption, some callers were disconnected before they entered the national 800-number queue or experienced extended wait times while employees were unable to log-in to telephone systems to take calls. Thus, although SSA maintained zero busy messages, service disruptions kept callers from connecting with an SSA employee. As busy messages started to increase, in February 2022 SSA capped¹⁶ the number of callers allowed to enter the telephone queue to avoid service disruptions. When SSA put the call limit in place, if the limit was reached, a caller would get a busy message.

¹³ SSA, Office of Quality Review, *800-Number Caller Survey Report*, p. 5 footnote 2 and p.10 (May 2022).

¹⁴ According to SSA, its maximum capacity for teleservice center employment is 5,220 employees.

¹⁵ We discuss more about SSA’s human capital management, including how SSA plans for and manages current and future workforce needs in a September 2022 report on *The Social Security Administration’s Human Capital Planning*, A-02-19-50866.

¹⁶ See section on Causes of and Actions to Resolve Telephone Disruptions for more information on the cap.

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The FOs had a peak of over 1 million busy messages at the beginning of 2022, but, as FOs resumed non-appointment services to the public, the FOs received fewer calls and had fewer busy messages (see Appendix G, Table G–9). Beginning in May 2022, busy messages for FO telephone calls remained below 130,000 for the remainder of 2022.

Automated Services Available During Telephone Disruptions

SSA's automated services allow callers to obtain recorded information and conduct some business 24 hours a day. As of FY 2023, SSA's automated services included:

- obtaining verifications for benefits, such as retirement, disability, Supplemental Security Income, and Medicare;
- requesting replacement Medicare cards;
- checking claims status for individuals who filed for benefits;
- requesting forms and pamphlets; and
- finding FO address, telephone number, office hours, or directions.¹⁷

During the 40 telephone service disruptions since May 2021, there was one instance on September 6, 2022 where automated services were also unavailable to callers for four hours on the national 800-number.¹⁸ During this outage, callers received a busy message or their call was dropped.

Causes of and Actions to Resolve Telephone Disruptions

According to SSA, it has worked with the telephone service vendor to identify and address the causes of the telephone disruptions. However, as of June 2023, there were still system issues under investigation. Some examples of service disruption causes related to:

- server issues,
- call quality issues based on software glitches,
- dead air on some calls because of needed equipment upgrades,¹⁹ and
- telephones unable to make or receive calls because of defective hardware.

Further, SSA determined the cause for the longest telephone service disruption on February 22 and 23, 2022 was an unusually high volume of calls to the national 800-number. The national 800-number averaged approximately 6 million calls in 2021 compared to over 7 million calls in 2022 (see Appendix G, Table G–1). Some of the increase occurred when SSA resumed non-appointment services in FOs and published fewer FO telephone numbers online. While FOs were limited to appointment-only services, in June 2020, SSA began publishing all FO telephone numbers on its FO locator Webpage to make it easier for the public to access

¹⁷ SSA, *Using Our Automated Telephone Services*, ssa.gov (last visited February 21, 2023).

¹⁸ SSA does not offer automated services on the FO telephone system; therefore, the unavailability of automated services did not apply for outages for this system.

¹⁹ "Dead air" refers to when a call connects, but one or both parties hear no audio.

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FOs by calling directly. However, once FOs resumed service to walk-in visitors with and without appointments, SSA reinstated publishing only a select number of FO direct-inquiry telephone numbers to the public. The FOs that did not have direct-inquiry lines published on SSA's Website listed the national 800-number. SSA also attributes some of the increased call volume to repeat callers who received a busy message, had their call dropped, or hung up while waiting to speak with an employee.

The total number of calls began decreasing in April 2022 as FOs resumed non-appointment services to the public. FOs averaged approximately 11 million calls per month in 2021. In 2022, the average calls per month declined to approximately 7 million. However, calls remained high from June 2021 through March 2022, when the telephone service disruptions began.

To mitigate another disruption caused by a high call volume, SSA limited the number of callers waiting in the national 800-number queue to 12,000. Previously, there was no limit to the number of callers who could wait in the queue to speak with an employee on the Unification platform. Once the 12,000-call limit is reached, a caller hears an SSA-scripted message asking them to call back later followed by a call disconnect. However, as of February 23, 2022, issues continued that caused interruptions in SSA's telephone service, including an issue on March 14, 2022 related to excessive calls that overloaded the Agency's telephone system after the queue was limited to 12,000 callers. As of December 30, 2022, SSA decided to reduce the call limit to a maximum of 10,000 callers to maintain platform stability. According to SSA, it based this decision on test results that demonstrated platform instability and performance issues with more than 10,000 callers in queue. As of May 1, 2023, and since putting this call limit in place, SSA has not experienced any platform instability disruptions. See Appendix D for a full list of telephone service disruptions, durations, system affected, cause, resolution and actions taken to prevent a recurrence.

Agency Actions to Prevent Disruptions or Quickly Restore Telephone Service

According to SSA, the TSRP is the back-up system for the Unification platform. However, SSA is updating TSRP equipment and is scheduled to finish the upgrades in FY 2023. According to SSA, it has completed some of the updates, including upgrades for firewalls, switches, and other software updates.

In addition to limiting the number of callers allowed to wait in the national 800-number queue, the Agency limited the number and types of systemic changes to the Unification platform to maintain stability. SSA also directed the vendor to change operating procedures to reduce the likelihood of a service disruption. One such measure was to regularly schedule off-hour system restarts to ensure stability. The Agency has also deployed additional monitoring tools to ensure servers continue to operate without becoming overwhelmed and to assist with diagnosing any performance issues. However, there are no systems controls in place to restore service quickly. Once SSA completes the transition to the NGTP, the Agency will have access to an updated testing environment to allow preproduction testing to identify and correct issues before deploying software into production.

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The Agency's Telephone Contract and Service Level Agreement

According to SSA, "Federal ...Regulation sets forth the policy on including liquidated damages clauses in contracts. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]²⁰ Further, Federal regulations state that liquidated damages are not punitive and are not negative performance incentives.²¹ [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]²²

[REDACTED]²³

However, according to SSA, ". . . [the Agency has] withheld payments when deliverables and services have not met acceptance standards, including some monthly recurring costs related to Unification contract management." [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]²⁴

SSA has a Service Level Agreement for the NGTP; however, the Agency did not create a Service Level Agreement for the Unification platform it is operating under because it was meant to be a short-term solution to complete the planned transition to the NGTP platform.

SSA does not have a set date for the NGTP completion.²⁵ Given numerous delays, protests, and supply-chain issues associated with the pandemic, the NGTP has not been implemented, so, as of April 2023, SSA employees were still using temporary solutions under the Unification platform. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]²⁶ SSA indicated it developed a technical refreshment plan to help mitigate risks posed by the outdated TSRP contract. The Agency plans to complete each aspect of the technical refreshment plan in FY 2023, which includes:

²⁰ 48 C.F.R. § 11.501. SSA asserts that this information is protected from release under the Deliberative Process Privilege. SSA OIG provides no comment on the validity of this assertion.

²¹ 48 C.F.R. § 11.501(b).

²² SSA asserts that this information is protected from release under the Attorney Client Communication Privilege. SSA OIG provides no comment on the validity of this assertion.

²³ SSA asserts this information should be treated as protected from disclosure under 48 C.F.R. 3.104-4. SSA OIG provides no comment on the validity of this assertion.

²⁴ 48 C.F.R. § 11.501. SSA asserts that this information is protected from release under the Deliberative Process Privilege. SSA OIG provides no comment on the validity of this assertion.

²⁵ Initially, the contract scheduled the NGTP to begin in June 2021 and be complete by June 2023. SSA, OIG, *The Social Security Administration's Telephone Services During June 2020*, A-05-20-50998, p.11 (April 2021).

²⁶ SSA asserts this information should be treated as protected from disclosure under 48 C.F.R. 3.104-4. SSA OIG provides no comment on the validity of this assertion.

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- Replacing telephone hardware that was deemed inadequate for the volume of inbound calls.
- Updating the interactive voice response system and contact center automatic call distribution system.

According to SSA, the technical refreshment plan remains on schedule.

SSA has not asked for contract modifications as a result of the service disruptions and does not plan to upgrade Unification through additional modifications outside of the technical refreshment plan for TSRP.²⁷ Based on this information, we asked SSA whether it should put a Service Level Agreement in place, but according to SSA, “. . . adding [a Service Level Agreement] to the existing Unification Task Order would require additional negotiations with the vendor and a bilateral agreement to ‘implement’ them. Since [SSA does] not plan to upgrade Unification, [it does] not plan on reopening negotiations with [the vendor] over Unification. Moreover, because [SSA] [has] unsuccessfully sought to negotiate with [the vendor] to include performance based incentives to [the vendor] in the past, we do not believe [the vendor] would agree to a bilateral modification implementing [a Service Level Agreement].”

CONCLUSION

SSA does not have a time frame for completing the NGTP. Although SSA has withheld payments from the vendor when deliverables and services have not met acceptance standards, SSA has not asked for contract modifications and did not have plans to implement a Service Level Agreement to ensure continuity of service as it continued operating under the outdated TSRP and the temporary Unification platform. As such, disruptions could continue and impact SSA’s ability to serve the public by causing additional dropped calls and unavailable automated services. As of May 1, 2023, SSA has not had any additional disruptions on the national 800-number since December 30, 2022. However, as SSA further capped the number of callers that could enter the queue to speak with an employee to maintain stability of the Unification platform, wait times and busy messages could continue to increase as less callers are able to get through for service. As the call volume increases, SSA answers fewer calls and wait times increase, both on days of service disruptions and days when service disruptions do not occur, because callers who were unable to get through to the Agency on a day a service disruption occurred likely attempted to reach SSA on a different day.

AGENCY COMMENTS

SSA stated it has worked steadily to improve the stability of its temporary solution and plans to implement the NGTP platform for the national 800-number by the end of FY 2023 (see Appendix H).

²⁷ We are planning a review of *Controls over SSA’s Contracts and Contractors*, 022324.

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OIG RESPONSE

As noted in footnote 25, initially, the contract scheduled the NGTP to begin in June 2021 and be complete by June 2023. Because of delays with the NGTP implementation, we will need to wait and see if SSA meets its deadline of implementing the NGTP platform for the 800-number by the end of FY 2023. Further, SSA still needs to set a goal for completion of the final stages of the NGTP, including adding the FO and Headquarters telephone systems to operate under a single platform.



Michelle L. Anderson
Assistant Inspector General for Audit

APPENDICES

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Appendix A – CONGRESSIONAL REQUEST LETTER

**COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20515**

May 16, 2022

The Honorable Gail S. Ennis
Inspector General
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21235

Dear Inspector General Ennis:

We appreciate the Office of the Inspector General’s (OIG) recent report, “The Social Security Administration’s Telephone Service Performance,” and write to request that the OIG conduct a follow-up review of the ongoing performance of, and disruptions to, the Social Security Administration’s (SSA) multiple telephone systems.

SSA’s telephone systems are an essential way for the public to reach the agency for information and assistance with benefits, Social Security numbers, and other vital services. However, SSA has for many years operated three separate legacy telephone systems for its national 800-number, field offices, and headquarters. SSA is working to replace these systems with a modern, unified telephone system through its Next Generation Telephony Project (NGTP). When fully implemented, NGTP is expected to improve telephone customer service by merging the three legacy systems into a single platform designed to be more efficient, stable, and functional. However, this needed upgrade was delayed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In March 2020, when SSA limited in-person field office service to ensure the safety of the public and its employees, the telephone became the primary option for members of the public who needed to interact with SSA employees. To accommodate remote operations, SSA implemented workarounds to its legacy telephone systems that modified functionality and capacity. Since then, SSA has seen an increase of approximately 55 million calls per year (40 percent) from 2019 to 2021.

Despite the April 7, 2022 reopening of SSA’s offices to the general public, the agency continues to encourage the public to call for help or to schedule an in-person appointment, and many still rely on SSA’s telephone services as a primary service channel. However, we have recently received reports of substantial telephone service disruptions and are concerned about the impact these have on the American people’s ability to access telephone services and schedule in-office appointments. Given the continuing importance of telephone services even as in-person services resume, we request a report addressing the following questions:

1. Describe each of the telephone system disruptions SSA experienced including:
 - a. When did disruptions occur, and for how long?

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- b. Which of SSA's three legacy systems were impacted (national 800-number, field offices, and/or headquarters)?
 - c. What impact did the disruptions have on the public's ability to conduct business with SSA? How many calls went unanswered? How many calls waiting in queue were dropped? Were callers able to use the telephone system's automated services?
 2. Has SSA and/or its vendor(s) determined the cause(s) of the disruptions and resolved them?
 - a. If yes, describe the cause(s) and what mitigation actions SSA or the vendor(s) took to restore service. Additionally, explain what SSA and its vendor(s) have done to identify what excessive call volume preventative or diagnostic capabilities could better protect the system and ensure uninterrupted telephone access to SSA.
 - b. If no, provide reasons why and when SSA and/or its vendor(s) estimate the disruptions will be resolved.
 3. Does SSA or its vendor(s) have redundant or backup systems so that services can be restored quickly in the event of disruptions? If not, why not?
 4. What are SSA and its vendor(s) doing to prevent the recurrence of outages and respond to future disruptions? Describe system controls in place to prevent outages and/or to restore service quickly when they occur.
 5. Does SSA's contract(s) with its vendor(s) allow SSA to recover costs related to service disruptions in the event of an outage? If not, why not?
 6. Does SSA have a service level agreement with its vendor(s)? What are the responsibilities of SSA and its vendor(s), respectively, for ensuring the continued availability of the telephone system?
 7. Provide detailed information on the telephone system contract(s) with the vendor(s), including:
 - a. The status of the transition to and full implementation of one unified telephone system;
 - b. Obstacles delaying the transition and full implementation. Include information on actions SSA or the vendor(s) have taken as well as the status and timing of actions to be taken to address outstanding barriers to full implementation; and
 - c. SSA's plans to further review or amend the contract with the vendor(s).
 8. Provide a comparison of the functionality and capacity for the telephone systems prior to being modified to accommodate remote operations, after modification, and the anticipated functionality and capacity once NGTP is fully implemented.

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Letter to Inspector General Ennis
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Thank you for your prompt attention to this request.

Sincerely,



John B. Larson
Chairman
Subcommittee on Social Security



Kevin Hern
Ranking Member (Acting)
Subcommittee on Social Security

Appendix B – SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

To achieve our objective, we:

- Reviewed the Social Security Administration's (SSA) policies and procedures.
- Analyzed telephone service data on calls received, average speed of answer, and calls abandoned in queue for the national 800-number and field offices from January 2021 through December 2022.
- We initially requested information from SSA in June 2022 and received a response in August 2022. In August 2022, we sent a follow-up request based on SSA responses and received the Agency's response in November 2022. This information related to service disruptions, including:
 - how many disruptions occurred,
 - the date of each disruption,
 - the duration of each occurrence,
 - which of SSA's three legacy systems was affected, and
 - the causes of each disruption and whether SSA or the vendor had resolved the issue(s), including actions taken to restore service and prevent future disruptions.
- Compared the functionality and capacity of the telephone system before SSA modified it for remote operations, after the temporary Unification into a single telephone platform, and the anticipated functionality and capacity once the Next Generation Telephony Project (NGTP) is fully implemented.
- Obtained information about SSA's contract with the vendor, including (1) whether the contract allowed SSA to recover costs related to service disruptions in the event of an outage and why and (2) the status of the transition to the full implementation of the NGTP.

We conducted our review between June 2022 and February 2023 in Chicago, Illinois. The principal entity reviewed was SSA's Office of the Deputy Commissioner for Operations.

SSA collects the data on telephone calls electronically through its Office of Customer Service, and we limited our analysis to the data SSA provided. Based on the information we obtained from SSA and documentation we reviewed, we determined the data we used were sufficiently reliable given our objectives and the intended use of the data should not lead to incorrect or unintentional conclusions. As noted throughout the report, because of a system disruption, SSA could not collect telephone service management information for March 11, 2022. This disruption only affected SSA's ability to collect management information and did not affect telephone service.

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We assessed the significance of internal controls necessary to satisfy the audit objective. This included an assessment of the five internal control components, including control environment, risk assessment, control activities, information and communication, and monitoring. In addition, we reviewed the principles of internal controls associated with the audit objective. We identified the following two Components and five Principles as significant to the audit objective.

- Component 1: Control Environment
 - Principle 2: Exercise oversight and responsibility
 - Principle 3: Establish structure, responsibility, and authority
 - Principle 5: Enforce Accountability
- Component 5: Monitoring
 - Principle 16: Perform monitoring activities
 - Principle 17: Remediate Deficiencies

We conducted this audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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Appendix C – PRIOR OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL REVIEWS

The Social Security Administration’s Telephone Service Performance ([A-05-20-50999](#)), November 2021

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

SSA’s telephone services shifted to more calls to FOs in FY 2020 when the Agency limited in-person service and provided the public with more FO telephone numbers. The increase in FO 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 declining toward the end of the FY, though it was still better than pre-pandemic performance. When we compared 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 planned to implement a new telephone system.

The Social Security Administration’s Telephone Services During June 2020 ([A-05-20-50998](#)), April 2021

In June 2020, SSA’s FOs and national 800-number received 30 percent more calls than June 2019, with FOs receiving most of the additional calls. Also, during the same periods:

- Calls to the FOs and the national 800-number during business hours resulted in fewer busy messages, though the business hours for the national 800-number were reduced in June 2020.
- The number of callers who hung up without speaking to an employee during business hours was lower for the FOs but slightly higher for the national 800-number.
- The number of calls handled by employees was much higher for calls to the FOs but remained about the same for calls to the national 800-number.
- Callers to FOs waited less time for service while callers to the 800-number waited longer.

SSA altered operations because of the COVID-19 pandemic to continue serving the public through its telephone operations. SSA equipped employees with necessary technology to answer the increasing number of calls while they were teleworking. SSA also shared FO general telephone numbers not previously available so the public could contact employees at the local level for service during business hours. While SSA reduced the number of callers receiving a busy message, this was partially enabled by reducing hours for the national 800-number. Further, there was no measure of customer feedback since the Agency did not use post-call surveys for FO calls and turned this feature off for the national 800-number. SSA has

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not returned to pre-pandemic operating hours for the national 800-number. In general, SSA's telephone services' performance during June 2020 was similar to 13 customer service call centers we reviewed from 10 other Federal agencies, as compared to June 2019, but SSA's performance seemed to fare better during the pandemic than industry call centers. In response to our report, SSA stated it would continue ensuring employees have the tools they need to improve service to the public.

The Social Security Administration's Telephone Services (A-05-20-50899), May 2020

Between FYs 2010 and 2019, SSA's national 800-number experienced a 6-percent increase in calls. In addition:

- Calls to the national 800-number resulted in more busy messages and hang-ups without the caller receiving service.
- The number of calls employees answered decreased.
- Callers waited longer for service.
- More callers had their issues resolved on the first call.
- Teleservice center staff levels declined by 12 percent.

While SSA did not fare as well compared to government and private-sector benchmarks, caller satisfaction was above the Federal average. To improve callers' experience and satisfaction, SSA planned to combine all its telephone service offerings into one platform to route calls to the best source quickly. In addition, SSA was implementing other improvements to its call center process and was hiring additional employees to answer telephone calls. However, effective March 31, 2020, in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, SSA temporarily changed its telephone services, including modified hours for its national 800-number. In response to our report, SSA stated its FY 2020 plan included a priority goal to improve wait times for service on the national 800-number through targeted hiring, reassessing training methods, and improved technology. SSA also stated that, through the first quarter of FY 2020, it hired and initially trained approximately 460 new hires to support the national 800-number operations and will continue efforts to replace staffing losses and hire additional employees.

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Appendix D – UNANSWERED RATE DURING DAYS OF TELEPHONE SERVICE DISRUPTIONS

Table D–1: Calls Offered, Answered, Rate of Answer, and Unanswered During Service Disruptions on SSA’s National 800-number

Disruption Date	Calls Offered to Employees	Calls Answered by Employees	Answer Rate	Unanswered Rate	Average Speed of Answer (Minutes)
May 14-19, 2021 (Average)	187,024	60,751	32.5%	67.5%	28.4
June 7, 2021	318,257	130,262	40.9%	59.1%	13.7
August 23, 2021	224,480	136,631	60.9%	39.1%	13.5
November 8, 2021	238,291	114,411	48.0%	52.0%	37.7
February 22-23, 2022 (Average)	391,355	76,869	19.6%	80.4%	46.3
March 1-2, 2022 (Average)	221,637	109,499	49.4%	50.6%	36.5
March 14, 2022	275,095	88,006	32.0%	68.0%	39.8
April 7, 2022	238,976	106,340	44.5%	55.5%	35.9
May 3, 2022	293,835	113,006	38.5%	61.5%	39.7
May 18, 2022	198,369	112,875	56.9%	43.1%	26.7
July 11, 2022	282,076	119,206	42.3%	57.7%	37.5
July 19, 2022	225,170	118,950	52.8%	47.2%	31.1
August 4, 2022	205,866	111,587	54.2%	45.8%	32.8
August 15, 2022	262,070	111,791	42.7%	57.3%	40.9
September 6, 2022	163,480	110,607	67.7%	32.3%	19.9
October 3, 2022	214,082	98,179	45.9%	54.1%	48.7
October 18, 2022	192,441	97,573	50.7%	49.3%	32.0
October 27, 2022	169,921	101,308	59.6%	40.4%	28.6
October 31, 2022	212,629	109,958	51.7%	48.3%	40.6
November 2, 2022	199,314	104,368	52.4%	47.6%	33.7
November 10, 2022	156,717	83,585	53.3%	46.7%	31.6
November 14, 2022	219,364	109,459	49.9%	50.1%	46.3
November 15, 2022	210,382	110,870	52.7%	47.3%	39.5
November 28, 2022	318,462	107,231	33.7%	66.3%	47.1
November 29, 2022	247,027	108,701	44.0%	56.0%	42.8
December 6, 2022	241,806	89,269	36.9%	63.1%	43.3
December 29, 2022	173,578	92,439	53.3%	46.7%	37.2
December 30, 2022	157,558	85,521	54.3%	45.7%	37.1

Source: SSA’s Office of Customer Service Management Information.

Notes: SSA’s management information tracks “calls answered by employees” at the beginning of a call, whereas calls handled by employees are tracked at the end of a call. SSA uses calls answered to measure its answer rate because the Unification platform does not include a measure of the calls handled by employees. Additionally, SSA does not staff the national 800-number on weekends, therefore we did not count any weekend days where a disruption occurred.

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Appendix E – TELEPHONE SERVICE DISRUPTIONS CAUSES AND RESOLUTIONS

Table E-1: The Social Security Administration’s Telephone Service Disruptions from May 2021 through December 2022 Causes and Resolutions

Count	Date/Duration	System(s) Affected	Cause	Resolution	Actions taken to Address/Prevent Reoccurrence
1	May 14-19, 2021 (Intermittent 5 days)	National 800-number	Moving two telephone platforms to single unified platform. Capacity constraints, employees were unable to log-in to take calls.	Re-configured employees’ computers to allow remote call answering.	Phased users into the new system to ensure both systems could answer calls.
2	June 7, 2021 (2 hours)	National 800-number	High call volume.	System restart.	Limited call volume capacity.
3	August 23, 2021 (14 hours)	National 800-number	Employees unable to log-in to take incoming calls; calls not recorded. SSA changed certificate issuing authority, the system was not recognizing the new authority.	Updated the certificates.	This will only be an issue if SSA changes certificate authorities again.
4	November 8, 2021 (1 hour and 45 minutes)	National 800-number	Problem with the Internet Protocol address; calls were not recording.	Updated Internet Protocol address and calls began recording.	This type of issue will be identified and remedied in laboratory testing before going into production.
5	January 18, 2022 (2 hours)	Field Offices	High call volume overwhelmed the servers.	Servers rebooted.	SSA will update servers to handle higher call volume.
6	February 22-23, 2022 (2 days)	National 800-number	Excessive calls per second while system was at peak capacity.	Servers rebooted.	Preventative measures were put into place to serve as guardrails to prevent this issue from reoccurring.
7	March 1-2, 2022 (2 days)	Field Offices	High call volume.	Servers rebooted.	Replaced network routing servers that could not handle high call volume.

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Count	Date/Duration	System(s) Affected	Cause	Resolution	Actions taken to Address/Prevent Reoccurrence
8	March 7, 2022 (14 hours)	Field Office	System was unable to handle call traffic and/or processing rate with the replaced equipment from early March 2022.	Reverted to network routing server.	The vendor updated the software.
9	March 14, 2022 (3 hours)	National 800-number	Excessive calls per second while at peak capacity.	A system restart solved the issue.	Interactive voice response (IVR) now manages the entry of calls, as the IVR has the capacity to better handle the calls per second spikes observed during the disruption.
10	March 21, 2022 (1 day)	Field Offices	Server issues.	Servers rebooted.	Equipment upgrades, including server replacement, were made between June 11 and July 12, 2022.
11	March 30, 2022 (1 day)	Field Offices	Server issues.	Servers rebooted.	Equipment upgrades, including server replacement, were made between June 11 and July 12, 2022.
12	April 7, 2022 (Intermittent throughout the day)	National 800-number	The browser auto updated during business hours.	Restarted browser to continue answering calls.	Temporarily suspended automatic updates and transitioned to the Agency default browser, which has managed updates.
13	May 3, 2022 (3 hours and 40 minutes)	National 800-number	The operation system terminated the contact center communication control service.	The affected service automatically restarted.	The vendor continues working on this issue, automating detection, and recovering from this event.
14	May 18, 2022 (3 hours)	National 800-number	A pointer record was missing on the Active Directory servers used by Unification.	Restored the Active Directory record until the Unification servers could be pointed to new servers.	Unification servers successfully pointed to new Active Directory servers.
15	June 21, 2022 (2 hours)	Field Offices	Server issues.	Servers rebooted.	Equipment upgrades, including server replacement, were made between June 11 and July 12, 2022.

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Count	Date/Duration	System(s) Affected	Cause	Resolution	Actions taken to Address/Prevent Reoccurrence
16	July 1, 2022 (11 days)	Field Offices	Intermittent dead air on some calls.	After hours reboot and all ports connected and synced.	Equipment upgrades, including server replacement.
17	July 11, 2022 (2 days)	National 800-number	Call quality and workspaces issues.	No fix identified; problem went away with lower call volume days.	Underlying cause was not found until the problem reoccurred the following week.
18	July 19, 2022 (2 days)	National 800-number	Call quality issue.	Call quality issues were coming through a single device; device was removed from the call path	The SSA network provider left the problem device offline and did not reintroduce to the incoming call path
19	July 19, 2022 (3 days)	Field Offices	High abandon rates.	Systems restarted contact center.	Ongoing TSRP upgrades to increase call quality and reduce issues.
20	July 26, 2022 (1 day)	Field Offices	Unable to receive inbound calls.	non-SSA network issue.	Vendor resolved its network issues.
21	August 4, 2022 (1 hour)	National 800-number	Employees unable to take calls, calls were dropping, and employees were being kicked out of call-taking software.	Short disruption resolved itself.	Vendor installed a patch upgrade to the servers that will provide more resilience if future communication disruptions occur.
22	August 11, 2022 (4 hours)	Debt Management Section (DMS)	Inbound call issues.	System reboot fixed the problem.	Removed anomaly in database.
23	August 15, 2022 (30 minutes)	National 800-number	Network call issues prevented calls from getting through.	Restarted servers.	As of June 2023, the vendor has been unable to provide root cause.
24	August 29, 2022 (6 hours)	Field Offices	Hard telephones unable to make or receive calls.	Defective hardware replaced.	Defective hardware was replaced.
25	September 6, 2022 (4 hours)	National 800-number	Callers could not get through and could not hear the IVR and either received a busy message or the call was dropped.	Restarted four IVR database servers.	As of June 2023, the vendor root cause investigation was in process.

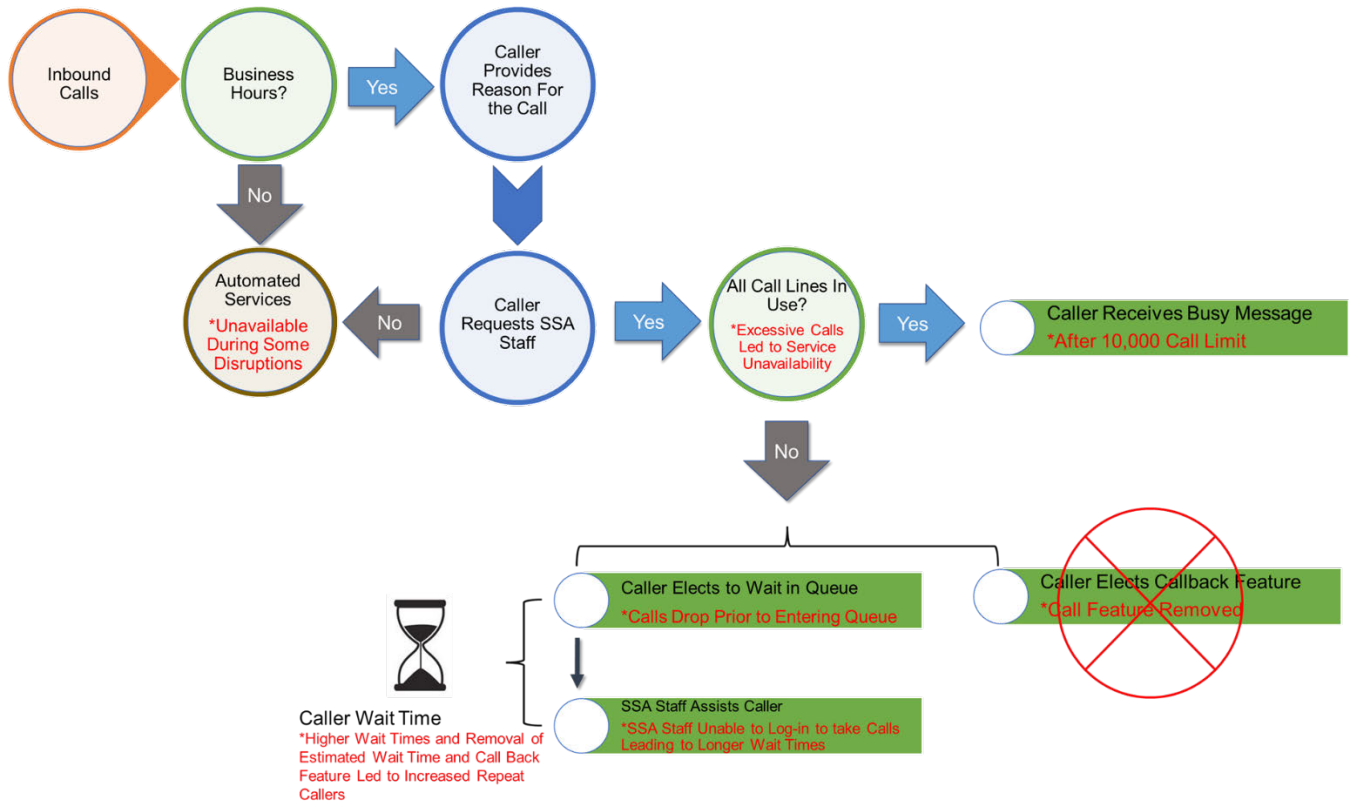
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Count	Date/Duration	System(s) Affected	Cause	Resolution	Actions taken to Address/Prevent Reoccurrence
26	October 3, 2022 (2 hours)	National 800-number	Employees were being logged out and unable to log back into system to take calls.	Rebooted servers.	Updated system to take calls October 4, 2022 to remedy issue
27	October 11, 2022 (1 day)	Field Offices	Unable to receive incoming general inquiry calls.	Issue was cleared during testing.	Systems were monitored to ensure correction during testing.
28	October 18, 2022 (1.5 hours)	National 800-number	Employees unable to log in to take calls.	Rebooted servers.	Cause unavailable because of a lack of network logs.
29	October 27, 2022 (2 hours)	National 800-number	Employees unable to log-in to take calls.	Restarted system.	Set system to auto-restart and daily monitoring health checks.
30	October 31, 2022 (Unable to determine)	National 800-number	Employees unable to authenticate at several locations.	Issue was not widespread, SSA's Help Desk assisted employees on a case-by-case basis.	Not a platform issue.
31	November 2, 2022 (1 hour and 45 minutes)	National 800-number	Approximately 300 employees received "device not registered" errors and "failed to activate" errors.	Contractor ran workspace clean up script to clear errors and allow employees to log back in.	Happened again on November 15, 2022; contractor put in configuration change to correct problem and keep it from reoccurring
32	November 7, 2022 (Intermittent throughout the day)	National 800-number	Call quality issues including, static, breaking up and some dropped calls.	Changes made to improve call quality.	Changed the session border controller, public carrier network and SSA-owned enterprise. Updated firmware that was having issues.
33	November 10, 2022 (35 minutes)	National 800-number	Platform stopped processing calls.	Rebooted servers.	Two updates: (1) reorganizing processors and (2) removing hyper-threading
34	November 14, 2022 (Intermittent throughout the day)	National 800-number	Same as November 7, 2022.	Same as November 7, 2022.	Same as November 7, 2022.
35	November 15, 2022 (1.5 hours)	National 800-number	Same as November 2, 2022.	Same as November 2, 2022.	Same as November 2, 2022.

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Count	Date/Duration	System(s) Affected	Cause	Resolution	Actions taken to Address/Prevent Reoccurrence
36	November 28, 2022 (Intermittent throughout the day)	National 800-number	Same as November 7, 2022.	Same as November 7, 2022.	Same as November 7, 2022.
37	November 29, 2022 (20 minutes)	National 800-number	Dropped calls and failed to activate issues.	Issue corrected itself.	Call quality changes from previous disruptions.
38	December 6, 2022 (1.5 hours)	National 800-number	900 employees logged on to contact platform unable to take calls; employees also unable to log in to take calls.	Rebooted system; some employees were able to restart while other employees had to wait for repaired script to run.	Contractor implemented reduction in queue size from 12,000 to 10,000 calls so machines could handle larger calls per second. This was implemented on December 29, 2022.
39	December 29, 2022 (45 minutes)	National 800-number	Communication server adaptor, caused employees to lose connectivity.	Rebooted system; some employees were able to restart other employees had to wait for repaired script to run.	Workspaces adaptor restarted on its own, once it restarted, the issue resolved.
40	December 30, 2022 (30 minutes)	National 800-number	Eight sites reported employees placed in 'not ready' status, unable to take calls.	Restarted laptops or workspaces.	No platform-wide issues to explain the cause; unknown.

Appendix F – NATIONAL 800-NUMBER CALL FLOWCHART

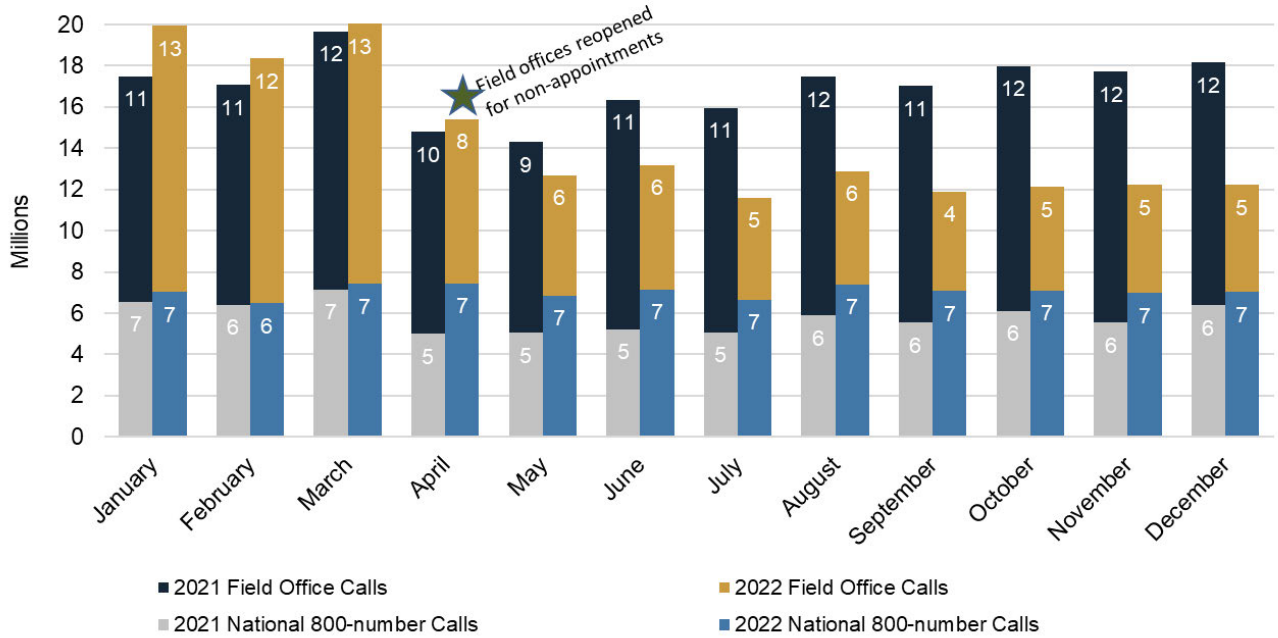


Note: During business hours, callers are presented with an option to use automated services before entering the queue to speak with an employee.

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Appendix G – 2021 AND 2022 TELEPHONE PERFORMANCE DATA

Figure G-1: Calls to the Agency



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Table G–1: Calls to the Agency

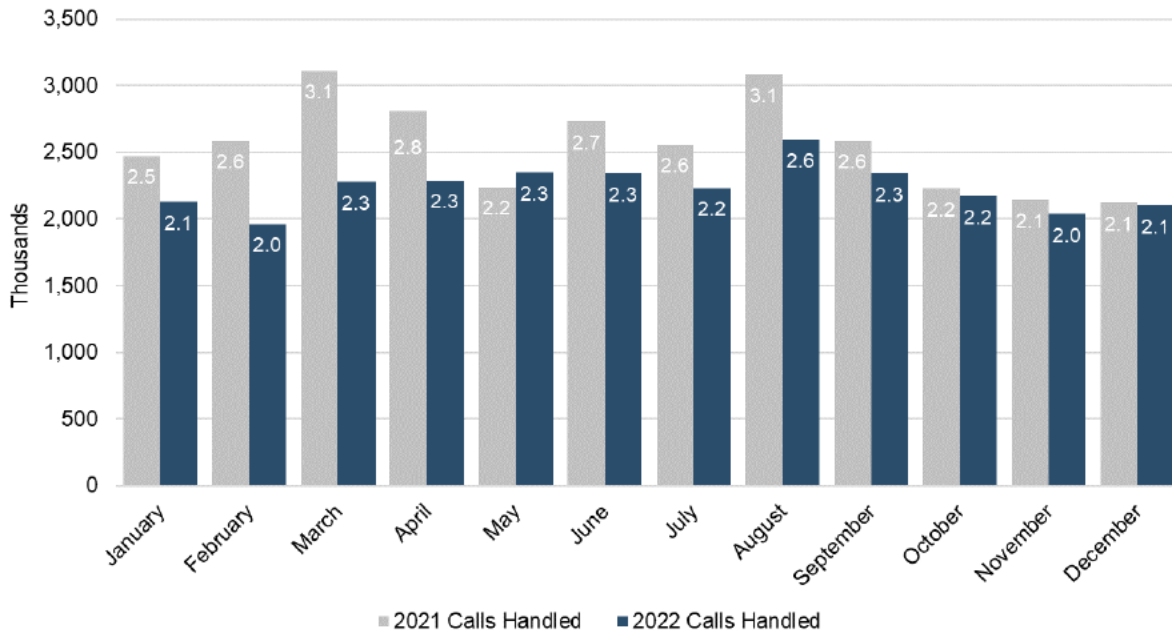
Date	Field Office Calls	National 800-number Calls	Total Calls
January 2021	10,936,862	6,556,340	17,493,202
February 2021	10,664,756	6,392,891	17,057,647
March 2021	12,503,391	7,149,242	19,652,633
April 2021	9,796,697	5,002,382	14,799,079
May 2021	9,259,489	5,042,284	14,301,773
June 2021	11,108,608	5,230,598	16,339,206
July 2021	10,872,178	5,072,982	15,945,160
August 2021	11,573,335	5,891,499	17,464,834
September 2021	11,485,508	5,528,184	17,013,692
October 2021	11,884,277	6,111,150	17,995,427
November 2021	12,181,526	5,536,426	17,717,952
December 2021	11,760,743	6,387,943	18,148,686
2021 Average	11,168,948	5,825,160	16,994,108
January 2022	12,918,723	7,015,018	19,933,741
February 2022	11,885,471	6,471,087	18,356,558
March 2022	13,239,090	7,426,481	20,665,571
April 2022	7,983,312	7,437,644	15,420,956
May 2022	5,830,015	6,848,263	12,678,278
June 2022	6,054,539	7,132,649	13,187,188
July 2022	4,934,466	6,650,931	11,585,397
August 2022	5,502,710	7,390,929	12,893,639
September 2022	4,836,717	7,066,069	11,902,786
October 2022	5,016,491	7,096,253	12,112,744
November 2022	5,257,707	6,967,308	12,225,015
December 2022	5,188,854	7,031,107	12,219,961
2022 Average	7,387,341	7,044,478	14,431,820

Source: SSA's Office of Customer Service Management Information.

Note: Because of a system disruption, SSA could not collect telephone service management information for March 11, 2022.

REDACTED

Figure G–2: National 800-number Calls Handled by Employees 2021 and 2022



Source: SSA's Office of Customer Service Management Information.

Note: Because of a system disruption, SSA could not collect telephone service management information for March 11, 2022.

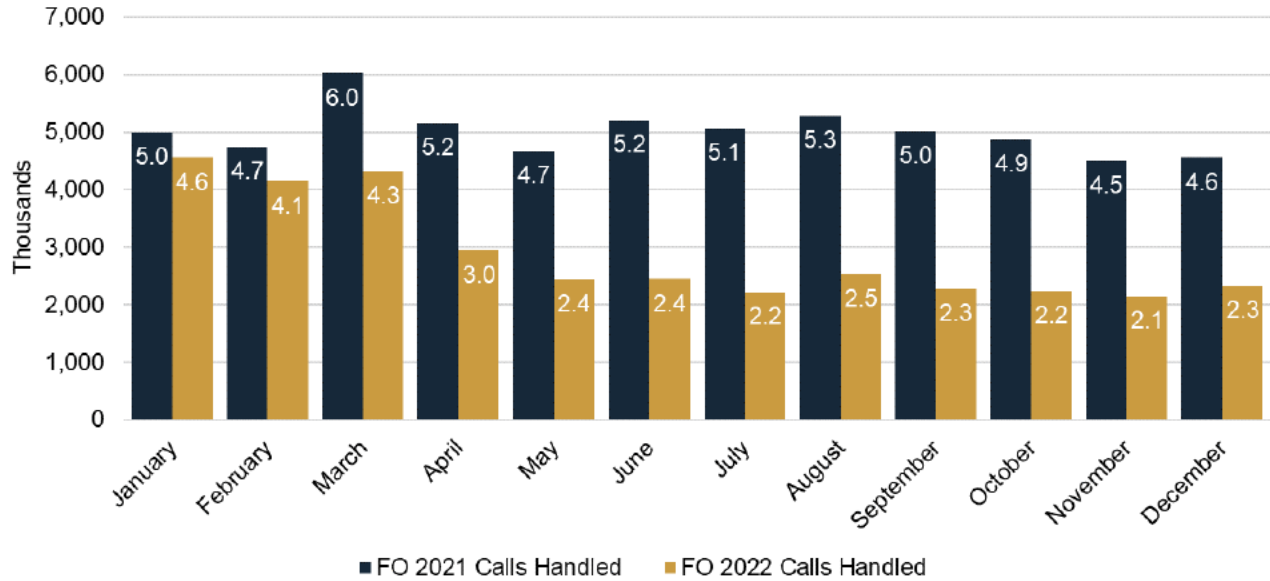
Table G–2: National 800-number Calls Handled by Employees

Date	Total Calls 2021	Total Calls 2022
January	2,470,076	2,127,101
February	2,584,644	1,962,687
March	3,108,230	2,277,217
April	2,813,113	2,288,466
May	2,235,818	2,348,988
June	2,730,479	2,340,841
July	2,556,285	2,228,814
August	3,085,179	2,593,214
September	2,585,789	2,339,226
October	2,226,101	2,171,687
November	2,142,690	2,037,006
December	2,119,844	2,100,211
Average	2,554,854	2,234,622

Source: SSA's Office of Customer Service Management Information.

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Figure G-3: Field Office Calls Handled by Employees 2021 and 2022



Source: SSA's Office of Customer Service Management Information.

Table G-3: Field Office Calls Handled by Employees

Date	Total Calls 2021	Total Calls 2022
January	4,995,368	4,558,823
February	4,743,385	4,148,506
March	6,026,375	4,315,790
April	5,159,168	2,948,747
May	4,673,391	2,435,971
June	5,206,941	2,448,203
July	5,065,736	2,218,862
August	5,277,963	2,532,489
September	5,014,632	2,273,573
October	4,867,661	2,237,081
November	4,506,595	2,148,491
December	4,554,399	2,323,825
Average	5,007,635	2,882,530

Source: SSA's Office of Customer Service Management Information.

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Table G-4: Average Speed of Answer (Minutes)

Date	Field Office Average Speed of Answer 2021	Field Office Average Speed of Answer 2022	National 800-number Average Speed of Answer 2021	National 800-number Average Speed of Answer 2022
January	3.1	5.5	18.8	39.9
February	3.0	5.4	15.0	38.3
March	3.0	4.7	13.6	38.7
April	2.7	3.9	5.2	36.0
May	2.9	3.2	8.5	30.5
June	3.5	3.5	7.9	32.7
July	3.9	3.5	8.9	32.1
August	4.0	3.5	6.2	31.2
September	4.4	3.5	12.5	29.0
October	4.7	3.9	20.3	34.2
November	5.0	4.2	26.7	34.9
December	5.2	4.2	36.2	37.3
Average	3.8	4.1	15.0	34.6

Source: SSA's Office of Customer Service Management Information.

Table G-5: Number of Teleservice Staff and Percent Employment

Date	Total Staff	Staff Maximum	Percent Employment
June 2021	4,590	5,220	88%
July 2021	4,572	5,220	88%
August 2021	4,700	5,220	90%
September 2021	4,727	5,220	91%
October 2021	4,730	5,220	91%
November 2021	4,743	5,220	91%
December 2021	4,859	5,220	93%
January 2022	4,797	5,220	92%
February 2022	4,736	5,220	91%
March 2022	4,660	5,220	89%
April 2022	4,586	5,220	88%
May 2022	4,512	5,220	86%
June 2022	4,411	5,220	85%
July 2022	4,338	5,220	83%
August 2022	4,276	5,220	82%
September 2022	4,239	5,220	81%
October 2022	4,303	5,220	82%
November 2022	4,379	5,220	84%
December 2022	4,380	5,220	84%
Average	4,555	5,220	87%

Source: SSA's Office of Human Resources Operational Data Store.

REDACTED

Table G-6: National 800-number Calls Offered to Employees, Abandoned in Queue and Percent of Calls Abandoned in Queue

Date	Calls Offered to Employees 2021	Total Calls Abandoned 2021	Percent Calls Abandoned 2021	Calls Offered to Employees 2022	Total Calls Abandoned 2022	Percent Calls Abandoned 2022
January	4,250,248	1,686,154	40%	5,126,991	2,246,549	44%
February	4,318,483	1,675,720	39%	4,433,785	1,962,308	44%
March	4,844,643	1,668,496	34%	5,130,384	2,187,792	43%
April	3,291,398	462,827	14%	5,112,703	2,347,490	46%
May	3,170,786	827,970	26%	4,636,823	2,031,071	44%
June	3,926,313	1,145,359	29%	4,735,117	2,103,266	44%
July	3,598,961	1,017,303	28%	4,383,876	1,983,356	45%
August	4,426,394	1,340,611	30%	4,895,885	2,102,407	43%
September	3,911,231	1,243,695	32%	4,162,717	1,768,230	42%
October	4,232,705	1,996,941	47%	3,918,892	1,734,222	44%
November	3,574,441	1,433,242	40%	3,896,793	1,659,349	43%
December	4,317,666	2,109,246	49%	4,242,232	1,765,031	42%
Average	3,988,606	1,383,964	35%	4,556,350	1,990,923	44%

Source: SSA's Office of Customer Service Management Information.

Table G-7: Field Office Calls Offered to Employees, Abandoned in Queue, and Percent of Calls Abandoned in Queue

Date	Calls Offered to Employees 2021	Total Calls Abandoned 2021	Percent Calls Abandoned 2021	Calls Offered to Employees 2022	Total Calls Abandoned 2022	Percent Calls Abandoned 2022
January	5,938,085	543,884	9%	7,893,178	1,687,779	21%
February	5,595,244	536,111	10%	7,220,846	1,552,523	22%
March	7,181,968	741,370	10%	6,912,650	1,288,266	19%
April	5,883,018	465,981	8%	4,062,183	531,205	13%
May	5,458,890	471,082	9%	2,967,041	316,461	11%
June	6,573,272	814,941	12%	3,044,597	360,950	12%
July	6,531,138	833,780	13%	2,848,340	420,803	15%
August	6,916,955	913,724	13%	3,113,872	325,412	10%
September	6,925,383	1,033,488	15%	2,801,494	296,157	11%
October	7,190,249	1,290,386	18%	2,829,806	332,098	12%
November	7,263,988	1,436,848	20%	2,838,828	372,140	13%
December	7,335,119	1,414,167	19%	3,039,120	385,087	13%
Average	6,566,109	874,647	13%	4,130,996	655,740	16%

Source: SSA's Office of Customer Service Management Information.

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Table G–8: National 800-number Busy Messages and Busy Rates

Date	Total 2021	Busy Rate 2021	Total 2022	Busy Rate 2022
January	28,465	0.7%	751,966	14.7%
February	0	0.0%	443,055	10.0%
March	0	0.0%	610,617	11.9%
April	0	0.0%	459,462	9.0%
May	0	0.0%	249,697	5.4%
June	0	0.0%	289,571	6.1%
July	0	0.0%	170,400	3.9%
August	0	0.0%	199,392	4.1%
September	0	0.0%	54,816	1.3%
October	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
November	0	0.0%	185,366	4.8%
December	52,115	1.2%	347,406	8.2%
Average	6,715	0.2%	313,479	6.9%

Source: SSA's Office of Customer Service Management Information.

Notes: SSA calculates the busy rate based on the number of calls offered to employees (see Appendix G, Table G–6). While SSA was still operating under two telephone platforms for the national 800-number, from April 2020 to May 2021, it had the capability to allow more callers to enter the telephone queue without generating busy messages leading to minimal busy messages during this time. However, during that time, some callers were disconnected before entering the national 800-number queue or experienced extended wait times while employees were unable to log-in to telephone systems to take calls. Thus, although SSA maintained zero busy messages, service disruptions kept callers from connecting with an SSA employee.

Table G–9: Field Office Busy Messages and Busy Rates

Date	Total 2021	Busy Rate 2021	Total 2022	Busy Rate 2022
January	280,114	4.7%	1,041,761	13.2%
February	218,784	3.9%	958,619	13.3%
March	274,418	3.8%	873,002	12.6%
April	159,797	2.7%	340,672	8.4%
May	200,678	3.7%	72,441	2.4%
June	366,080	5.6%	76,278	2.5%
July	399,396	6.1%	69,870	2.5%
August	464,290	6.7%	94,724	3.0%
September	542,363	7.8%	89,917	3.2%
October	653,707	9.1%	94,986	3.4%
November	876,571	12.1%	124,134	4.4%
December	828,255	11.3%	116,409	3.8%
Average	438,704	6.7%	329,401	8.0%

Source: SSA's Office of Customer Service Management Information.

Note: SSA calculates the busy rate based on the number of calls offered to employees (see Appendix G, Table G–7).

REDACTED

Appendix H – AGENCY COMMENTS



SOCIAL SECURITY

MEMORANDUM

Date: June 7, 2023

Refer To: TQA-1

To: Gail S. Ennis
Inspector General

From: Scott Frey
Chief of Staff

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Scott Frey', is written over the printed name and title.

Subject: Office of the Inspector General Draft Report “The Social Security Administration’s Telephone Service Disruptions” (A-05-22-51149)—INFORMATION

Thank you for the opportunity to review the draft report. In early 2020, with limited in-person services available, we implemented temporary workarounds to our telephone systems enabling us to serve the public. Since then, we worked steadily to improve the stability of this temporary solution, reducing service disruptions since December 30, 2022. We plan to implement the Next Generation Telephony Project platform for the national 800-number by the end of this fiscal year.

Please let me know if I can be of further assistance. You may direct staff inquiries to Trae Sommer at (410) 965-9102).



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