

# The Social Security Administration's Telephone Service Disruptions

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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.