

The Social Security Administration's Controls over High-priority Modernized Development Worksheets A-07-18-50363



September 2021

Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To determine the effectiveness of the Social Security Administration's (SSA) controls for resolving high-priority requests sent via the modernized development worksheet (MDW) process.

Background

Because SSA's processing centers (PC), teleservice centers, and field offices have different processing roles and systems access, SSA employees are often required to contact other offices to request case processing assistance. Employees use MDWs, manually designated as either routine or high priority, to send requests for action to other field offices or PCs. Per SSA policy, high-priority MDW requests should be limited to situations that involve awards and disallowance of claims; start- and stop-payment actions; appeals; congressional inquiries; and public-relations issues. According to SSA's policy, employees should follow up on unresolved high-priority requests after 20 calendar days.

From SSA's Processing Center Action Control System, we identified 121,376 benefit records with high-priority MDWs pending at PCs as of January 28, 2020. Of these, 82,439 (68 percent) had MDWs that were pending for at least 60 days. We reviewed a random sample of 100 benefit records with high-priority MDWs pending at least 60 days.

Findings

SSA does not have effective controls for resolving high-priority requests sent via the MDW process. As a result, SSA made improper or delayed payments and inflated PC backlogs, which impeded efforts to improve customer service. For 51 of the 100 sampled benefit records, SSA did not resolve the high-priority MDWs or resolved them longer than 60 days after field office and teleservice center employees sent them to the PCs.

- As of April 2021, SSA had not resolved MDWs on 24 benefit records, including 20 that involved improper payments totaling over \$60,000. Based on this, we estimate SSA did not resolve high-priority MDWs on approximately 20,000 benefit records, which resulted in improper payments totaling over \$49 million.
- SSA had resolved high-priority MDWs on 27 benefit records but took the actions between 72 and 592 days after the request dates. As a result, for 21 of the 27 benefit records, SSA delayed payments, totaling over \$255,000, to beneficiaries. We estimate SSA did not timely resolve high-priority MDWs on over 22,000 benefit records, which resulted in delayed payments totaling over \$210 million.

For the remaining 49 benefit records, employees (1) resolved the high-priority MDWs but did not clear them or (2) made incorrect inputs on MDW requests. We estimate SSA's management information was inflated by over 40,000 high-priority MDWs, which further decreased the effectiveness of the MDW process.

Recommendations

We recommended SSA (1) take appropriate actions on unresolved high-priority MDWs, (2) improve its monitoring of high-priority MDW resolution, (3) develop and implement controls to ensure PC employees properly clear high-priority MDWs when they take corrective action, and (4) create controls over the MDW process.

SSA agreed with our recommendations.