The Social Security Administration's Mail Processing During the COVID-19 Pandemic
A-08-21-51115

Objective

To determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) had adequate controls over mail processing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background

On March 18, 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, SSA began limiting in-person services and redirecting most customers to its on-line and telephone services. These limits increased the volume of, and SSA's reliance on, mail. By April 2020, SSA had assigned more than 90 percent of its employees to full-time remote work. Only a small number of employees remained on-site at SSA offices to handle such non-portable work as processing mail.

Mail processing at SSA offices is primarily a manual workload. On-site employees must open and scan program-related mail into a workload management system. Once scanned, remote employees can assign and process the electronic documents. On-site employees must also mail documents printed in the office.

To accomplish our objective, we visited 73 SSA field offices, processing centers, and card centers. We interviewed the office managers, observed mail being processed, documented backlogged mail workloads, and sampled available mail items. We also held discussions, and corresponded, with representatives from the National Council of Social Security Management Associations and other Federal agencies.

Results

SSA lacked adequate controls over mail processing at its field offices, processing centers, and card centers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Agency lacked (1) management information and performance metrics and (2) comprehensive policies and procedures to track and return original documents. We also identified large backlogs of unprocessed mail at some SSA offices. On July 29, 2021, we issued an interim report notifying Agency officials of our findings so they could begin taking corrective action. Since then, the Agency reported it had eliminated its mail backlogs. We did not re-visit offices to verify that SSA employees had processed the mail backlogs.

Based on our interim report, SSA established procedures and timeliness guidelines to better manage its mail workload. As of January 2022, SSA reported approximately 99 percent of its offices were meeting the new timeliness guidelines. We did not verify that SSA offices accurately reported the timeliness of their mail workloads or that SSA's new mail procedures were working as intended. Representatives from the National Council of Social Security Management Associations indicated its members expressed concern that adhering to the timeliness guidelines adversely affects other workloads.

SSA could implement additional changes to facilitate timely and efficient processing of mail. For example, SSA could reduce manual actions by investing in software or equipment, expanding its use of Post Office Boxes, outsourcing mail duties to contractors, and expanding its use of centralized printing services. SSA could also reduce the volume of mail it sends and receives associated with original documents, forms, correspondences, and undeliverable mail workloads. SSA is considering initiatives to improve its mail processes.

Recommendations

We made eight recommendations for SSA to improve management of mail at its offices. SSA agreed with our recommendations.