

Safety of Employees and Visitors Since March 2020

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To respond to questions from the Subcommittee on Social Security regarding how many employees and visitors had entered Social Security Administration (SSA) offices since the Agency closed its offices; what work was being performed in the offices; and how SSA was ensuring the safety of employees and visitors in its offices.

Background

SSA stated it employs approximately 27,000 employees in its 1,237 field offices and Social Security card centers across the United States. On March 17, 2020, SSA began limiting in-person services in field offices and redirected customers to online and telephone service channels in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

On August 7, 2020, John B. Larson, Chair, and Tom Reed, Ranking Member, Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Social Security, requested information about the (1) numbers of employees and visitors to Social Security offices; (2) workloads SSA is processing and services it is providing in offices; and (3) measures SSA is taking to protect the health and safety of employees and visitors.

Results

Employee and Visitor Counts. SSA could not accurately account for all employees and visitors in its offices. SSA provided us with daily counts of employees and visitors in offices; however, we noted inaccuracies with them. Because SSA did not track the names of employees who entered its facilities or the contact information for all visitors, the Agency's ability to support contact tracing was limited. We also noted inconsistent reporting of offices that, due to COVID-19 exposures, had to close entirely.

In-office Workloads and Service to the Public. A limited number of employees have entered field offices to provide certain services to the public by appointment only. This includes processing certain requests for Social Security number cards, issuing immediate payments to individuals in critical need, and obtaining critical documents. Employees also perform other work that cannot be done remotely, including: opening mail; electronically sending documents to remote workers for action; and returning documents to the public. Office management took on a majority of this work. Some managers expressed concerns about their increased work in the office and their ability to perform that work in addition to their normal managerial duties.

Health and Safety Measures. The majority of survey respondents indicated they could raise safety concerns to management or a designated contact, and SSA effectively communicated overall operational status to employees. Staff indicated they had the supplies they needed to ensure employees and visitors were safe during the pandemic. Conversely, some office managers believed SSA leadership prioritized the health and safety of bargaining employees over management/non-bargaining employees.

Our observations are based on: (1) the 768 responses we received from our survey (which we sent to approximately 1,700 employees working in 54 field offices and 7 Social Security card centers); (2) our interviews with 62 supervisors from those offices; and (3) our visits to 59 field offices and 6 card centers. We did not randomly select all the offices we visited or the employees we surveyed/interviewed. Consequently, we do not assert—and the reader should not infer—that our observations represented the conditions in all of SSA's offices. In addition, circumstances may have changed since we conducted our interviews, surveys, and office visits between May and July 2021.