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Report: Disruptions in Telephone Services Limited the Social Security Administration's Ability to Respond to Public

More than 40 telephone system service disruptions from May 2021 through December 2022 led to dropped calls, increased wait times, and unavailable services

When the Social Security Administration (SSA) limited in-person services during the COVID-19 pandemic, customers relied on SSA's telephone system for critical services – but the system often failed them, according to SSA Office of the Inspector General's (OIG) June 21, 2023, report [The Social Security Administration's Telephone Service Disruptions, A-05-22-51149](#). Between May 2021 and December 2022, SSA's telephone system experienced over 40 telephone system disruptions, leading to dropped calls increased wait time, and in some instances, unavailable automated services.

For many years, SSA has operated three telephone systems for its national 800-number, field offices, and Headquarters. SSA planned to modernize those systems with a unified system; but the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic delayed the upgrade. The legacy systems could not handle the increased call volume. Auditors analyzed calls received, waiting in queue, answered, handled by automated services, or dropped.

The report found that from May 2021 through December 2022, SSA had more than 40 telephone service disruptions affecting the national 800-number and field office phone lines, leading to dropped, unanswered, or abandoned calls. Most of the disruptions happened between October and December 2022 and involved the 800-number. Disruptions also generated increased wait times or busy messages for the callers.

The rate of unanswered calls for those who opted to speak with an employee during each of the service disruptions was as high as 80 percent. Further, SSA's service on the national 800-number—including automated services—was unavailable during periods of up to two days. Causes of the disruptions, as identified in the report, included server issues, software glitches, and defective hardware.

“The telephone is still a primary method of communication for handling business for many Americans, particularly the vulnerable, elderly, and disabled; so, it is critical that

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SSA is reachable, especially by those who depend on them the most,” said Gail S. Ennis, Inspector General for SSA.

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. Since putting this call limit in place, SSA has not experienced any platform instability disruptions as of May 1, 2023. However, due to capped calls, wait times and busy messages could continue to occur as fewer callers are able to get through for service. SSA plans to implement the new 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 its telephone upgrade, including adding the field office and Headquarters telephone systems to operate under a single platform.

SSA OIG plans to release another audit pertaining to SSA’s 1-800 number in the coming months. See the full report [here](#).

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