

Social Security Administration Employees with Conduct Issues Who Received Monetary Awards A-08-15-50020



November 2015

Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) issued monetary awards to employees who had conduct issues.

Background

SSA uses awards to promote continuous quality service and recognize employee and team contributions to the Agency's success. SSA's two primary monetary awards are the Exemplary Contribution or Service Award (ECSA) and Recognition of Contribution (ROC).

SSA takes corrective actions to address employee performance and conduct problems. SSA generally uses progressive discipline to correct and improve employee behavior. SSA may initiate such progressive disciplinary patterns as reprimand, short- or long-term suspension, demotion, and removal. These are usually preceded by counseling and oral warnings.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, SSA awarded almost \$43 million to about 49,000 (82 percent) of its 60,000 employees. SSA disciplined 559 (1 percent) employees because of conduct issues in FY 2013.

We obtained and matched SSA data on awards it granted and disciplinary actions it took for employees with conduct issues in FY 2013. We did not independently verify the reliability of the data SSA provided.

Findings

SSA paid about \$145,000 in monetary awards to 240 employees it had disciplined for conduct issues. SSA reprimanded 126 (52.5 percent) employees, suspended 113 (47.1 percent), and demoted 1 (0.4 percent). The primary reasons SSA cited for the disciplinary actions included discourteous conduct, unauthorized access to SSA records, failure to follow SSA procedures, and misuse of Government credit cards.

SSA policy indicates that employees under SSA's Performance Assessment and Communications System must be in good standing to be eligible for ECSA and ROC awards. SSA considers employees in good standing when their rating of record (appraisal) is at least a summary level 3.0 (performing successfully), and the employee is not serving on an Opportunity to Perform Successfully Plan. SSA's Office of Personnel told us the 240 employees were in good standing when they received their award.

Additionally, while many awards are discretionary, under the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) National Agreement, SSA must provide rating-based ROC awards to AFGE employees it reprimanded if they meet the eligibility requirements. Accordingly, SSA would have been in violation of the AFGE Agreement had it not paid 34 AFGE employees \$23,842 in ROC awards.

Neither SSA awards policy nor Office of Personnel Management guidance prohibits giving an award to an employee who has been disciplined for conduct. Because the severity of conduct issues varies, we believe SSA should consider revising its policy on granting awards to employees who have certain conduct issues. We recognize that revising its awards policy will require that SSA work with bargaining unit representatives.

Recommendations

1. Evaluate and consider revising its awards policy to limit management officials' discretion to grant awards to employees who have certain conduct issues. In doing so, SSA should specify the types of conduct that would prevent individuals from receiving awards.
2. Match its employee disciplinary actions and awards databases to help management comply with its awards policy.

SSA agreed with our recommendations.