



Office of the Inspector General

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Audit Report

Controls over the Social Security Administration's National 800- number Service During the COVID-19 Pandemic

A-02-21-51079 | August 2023



Office of the Inspector General

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

MEMORANDUM

Date: August 29, 2023

Refer to: A-02-21-51079

To: Kilolo Kijakazi
Acting Commissioner

From: Gail S. Ennis 
Inspector General

Subject: Controls over the Social Security Administration's National 800-number Service During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The attached final report presents the results of the Office of Audit's review. The objective was to determine whether the Social Security Administration had and used management controls over the service its 800 number employees provided callers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Please provide within 60 days a corrective action plan that addresses each recommendation. If you wish to discuss the final report, please call me or have your staff contact Michelle L. Anderson, Assistant Inspector General for Audit.

Attachment

Controls over the Social Security Administration's National 800-number Service During the COVID-19 Pandemic

A-02-21-51079



August 2023

Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) had and used management controls over the service its 800-number employees provided callers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background

SSA's national 800-number allows SSA beneficiaries and the public to speak directly with Social Security representatives or use automated service options. Representatives are available to answer calls Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. local time to the caller. The automated services are available 24 hours a day.

In response to the pandemic, SSA limited in-person field office services and redirected customers to online and telephone service channels from March 2020 through April 2022. Most SSA employees, including 800-number employees, worked virtually during this period. While SSA began reopening its offices to the public in April 2022, it continues encouraging the public to use its online and telephone service options and rely on SSA's telephone services as a primary service channel.

Results

SSA had management controls in place over the service 800-number employees provided during the pandemic. However, two of the three controls were not effectively employed, and the third control did not ensure 800-number callers' requests were resolved timely and accurately.

- **Service Observations** – SSA management continued reviewing calls answered by 800-number employees during the pandemic, either through recorded calls or live observations. However, it did not meet its goal of conducting a monthly minimum of three service observations per employee for any month during the pandemic. Managers not completing the required number of service observations limited SSA's opportunity to monitor employees and improve the quality of service the Agency provides the public via its 800-number.
- **Speech Analytics** – During the pandemic, SSA did not always timely intervene with 800-number employees identified through speech analytics as providing problematic service to callers.
- **Modernized Development Worksheets (MDW)** – SSA employees use MDWs to transfer requests for needed actions between its components. SSA employees in other components were able to close MDWs created by 800-number employees in response to requests by 800-number callers without taking the requested actions, resulting in some callers making repeated calls to the 800-number to resolve the same issues.

These controls were in place before the pandemic, and SSA continued their use during the pandemic. Per SSA, service changes made in response to the pandemic initially limited some control efforts, including completing the targeted number of service observations.

Recommendations

We recommended SSA (1) create a performance standard requiring employees who conduct service observations to conduct a minimum of three service observations, as required by SSA policy, and (2) create policy to ensure all problematic calls identified through speech analytics are referred for regional management and regional management intervenes within defined timeframes. SSA disagreed with our recommendations.

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ABBREVIATIONS

C.F.R.	Code of Federal Regulations
MDW	Modernized Development Worksheet
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
POMS	Program Operations Manual System
SSA	Social Security Administration
SSI	Supplemental Security Income
VNOC	Voice Network Operations Center

OBJECTIVE

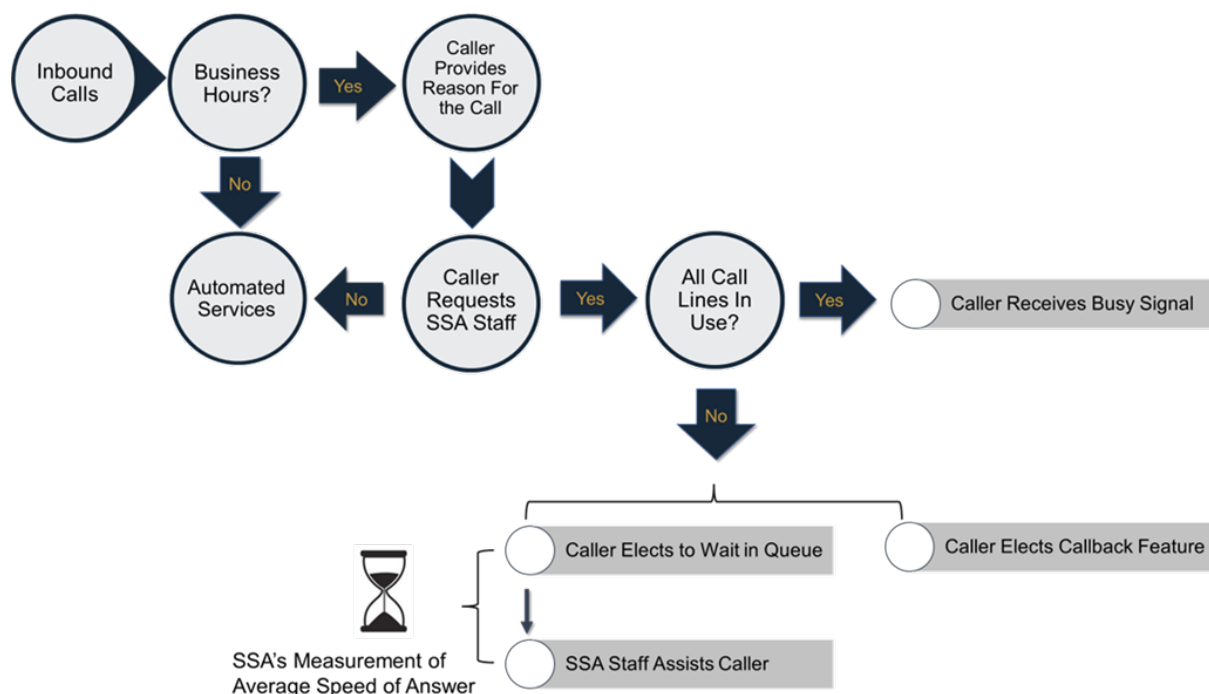
To determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) had and used management controls over the service its 800-number employees provided to callers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

BACKGROUND

SSA's national 800-number network serves as a primary telephone service for general inquiries and reports from SSA beneficiaries and the public. Callers to the national 800-number can choose automated services or request assistance from SSA employees.

The automated service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, except during system maintenance. It allows a caller to complete certain requests by responding to an automated menu instead of waiting for an employee. The automated services offer benefit verification, replacement Medicare cards, claim status, and requests for certain forms and pamphlets. Employees in SSA's 24 teleservice centers answer calls to the 800-number Monday through Friday between 8 a.m. and 7 p.m. local time to the caller. Figure 1 illustrates the process for calls to the 800-number.

Figure 1: National 800-number Call Flowchart¹



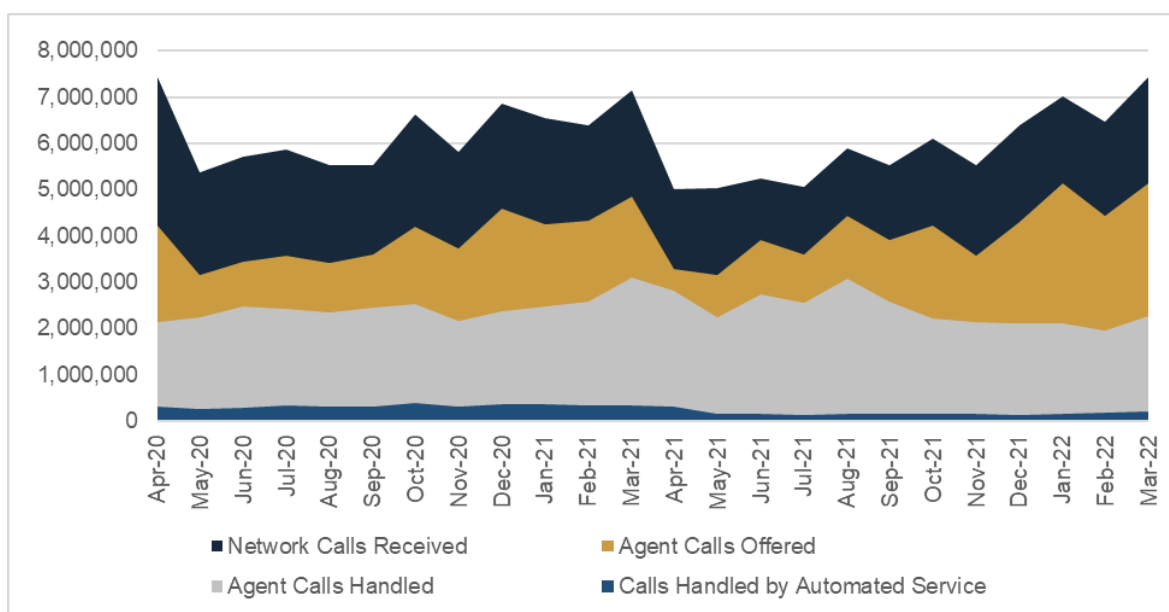
¹ Per SSA, it removed the callback feature in May 2021 as it switched to a different telephone platform to support employees working in a virtual environment.

SSA's public service objective is to handle calls to the 800-number accurately, uniformly, and efficiently to completion, reducing the need for individuals to call again or visit a field office. When 800-number employees are unable to resolve callers' needs, they request the assistance of field office and/or processing center employees using the Agency's Modernized Development Worksheet (MDW).²

COVID-19 Pandemic Response

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic.³ In response, SSA began limiting in-person field office services and redirected customers to online and telephone service channels. Most SSA employees, including teleservice center employees, moved into a virtual work environment. On April 7, 2022, SSA reopened its offices to the public.⁴ It continues encouraging the public to call for help or schedule an in-person appointment, and many still rely on SSA's telephone services as a primary service channel. From April 2020 to March 2022, SSA received over 145 million calls to its national 800-number; 800-number employees handled over 58 million of those calls (see Figure 2). For more details of 800-number performance metrics, refer to Appendix B.

Figure 2: National 800-number Call Patterns.⁵



² SSA field offices generally offer a full range of SSA services that include applying for new or replacement Social Security cards, applying for Social Security benefits and Supplemental Security Income payments, and changing benefit information. The processing centers handle complex benefit issues, including payment of Social Security retirement, survivor and disability benefits, Medicare, and a variety of other functions essential to the beneficiary rolls.

³ World Health Organization, *Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) Events as they happen*, who.int (July 31, 2020).

⁴ Social Security Administration, *Social Security Matters*, SSA.gov (April 4, 2022).

⁵ SSA provided the data of Network Calls Received, Agent Calls Offered which represents the number of callers who entered the queue to speak to 800-number employees, Agent Calls Handled, and Calls Handled by Automated Service. We did not independently verify the data represented in this figure.

Telephone Network Outages

At the start of the pandemic, SSA had separate telephone systems for its national 800-number, field offices, and Headquarters operations. To accommodate remote operations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, SSA modified the functionality and capacity of its legacy telephone systems.

In May 2021, SSA began implementing a unified telephone system to replace the three legacy systems via its Next Generation Telephony Project.⁶ When fully implemented, SSA expects the Project will improve telephone customer service by merging the three legacy systems into a single platform designed to be more efficient, stable, and functional.

The transitions in SSA's telephone systems throughout the pandemic resulted in reduced stability and functionality. Heavy call volumes overwhelmed the platform on numerous occasions, which caused service disruptions (that is, dropped call queues, dead-air calls, misdirected calls, and disconnections). Additionally, SSA lost access to multiple management information and oversight tools at various points over the past 2 years.^{7,8}

METHODOLOGY

We obtained access to multiple sets of data to identify and test SSA's controls over its 800-number service, including recordings of incoming 800-number calls from March 2020 through June 2021 that teleservice managers had selected for service observations. We listened to 200 randomly selected recorded calls and reviewed teleservice managers' comments on their service observation forms to determine whether 800-number employees provided quality service to callers.

We also obtained a list of calls answered by national 800-number employees that were identified as problematic through SSA's speech analytic review and referred to SSA regional management for further action. We reviewed the 50 employees who had the most calls referred through this process and asked SSA to provide information on the actions it took in response. Additionally, we reviewed 230 closed and pending MDWs. Further, we issued a survey to 800-number employees asking about their working experiences during the pandemic. See Appendix A for more information on our scope and methodology.

⁶ SSA, OIG, *The Social Security Administration's Telephone Service Performance*, A-05-20-50999, p. 22 (November 2021).

⁷ Before the pandemic, SSA supported an automated post-call survey. This survey was offered to all callers who spoke with an 800-number employee. To accommodate full-time telework during the pandemic, SSA transitioned to a different telephone system that did not support the post-call survey. The post-call survey will not be available until the 800-number network fully transitions to the New Generation Telephony Project. SSA initiated a replacement survey from March 2021 through January 2022 that used a contractor to conduct live telephone interviews to measure 300 callers' satisfaction on overall service, access to service, and 800-number employee courtesy.

⁸ SSA, OIG, *The Social Security Administration's Telephone Service Disruptions*, A-05-22-51149, (June 2023). We examined these service disruptions in a separate audit.

RESULTS OF REVIEW

SSA had management controls in place over the service 800-number employees provided during the pandemic, including management service observations and a speech analytics program. However, through most of the pandemic timeframe, SSA did not conduct as many management service observations per employee each month as were called for in its management guidance. It also did not always initiate management interventions timely to address employees identified as providing problematic service through the speech analytics program.

In addition, some individuals had to call the 800-number multiple times to resolve issues because SSA did not effectively have controls to follow up on the MDWs 800-number employees used to request assistance from field office or processing center employees to ensure the requested actions were resolved timely and accurately. As a result, some individuals had to make multiple calls to the 800-number to resolve issues that should have been resolved after their first call.

800-number Employee Service Observations

Per SSA's *National 800-Number Network Manager's Guide to Service Observation*,⁹ management should conduct a minimum of three service observations per teleservice center employee per month. SSA's memorandum of understanding with the American Federation of Government Employees outlines the service observation process and further supports that teleservice center employees will ordinarily have three service observations per month.¹⁰

Per SSA, service observations may be done on recorded calls or during live calls (see Appendix A, footnote 1 for additional information). SSA's Office of Customer Service is responsible for providing service observation training to teleservice center management through written guidance, live instruction, and videos-on-demand. It also monitors each teleservice center's compliance with the service observation requirement and notifies management if issues or concerns are uncovered. When conducting a service observation, the observer should determine the quality of the employee's call handling and courtesy and compliance with acceptable procedures and guidelines. The observer also determines the accuracy of information provided and effectiveness of the employee's interviewing techniques.

⁹ SSA, *Manager's Guide To Service Observation*, p. 5 (September 3, 2020).

¹⁰ SSA, *National Service Observation Process Memorandum of Understanding*, July 18, 2006. Per the Memorandum of Understanding, the minimum number of observations conducted for each employee per month is ordinarily three for employees in the teleservice centers, two for employees in the processing centers, and three for employees in the Office of Central Operations. Ordinarily, the minimum number of observations conducted for each part-time employee per month is two.

SSA's service observations generally identified errors employees made answering 800-number calls. We reviewed 200 calls management observed, and we generally agreed with SSA's service observation conclusions (see Table 1).¹¹

Table 1: SSA and OIG Review of Recorded 800-number Calls

		OIG
No Error	177	170
Service Error	16	19
Access and Disclosure Error	6	10
Conduct Error	1	1
Total	200	200

For seven calls, we found errors that teleservice managers did not identify when they conducted service observations.¹² In three calls, 800-number employees failed to answer calls according to SSA procedures or provided incorrect information to the callers. In four calls, we found access and disclosure errors, which occurred when 800-number employees failed to adhere to the rules and regulations designed to safeguard the confidentiality of an individual's personal information on SSA records. We forwarded our results to SSA and, upon further review, it agreed with our conclusions for the seven calls.

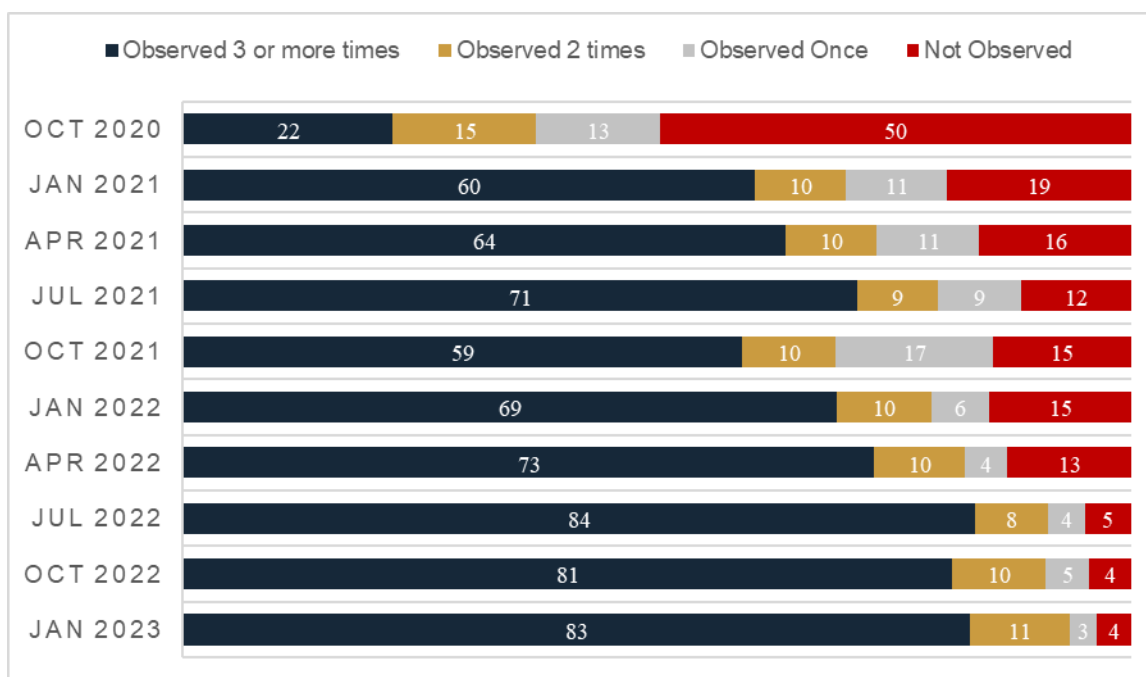
While service observations helped identify and correct 800-number employee errors, and SSA increased the percentage of eligible employees it observed over time, it did not conduct a minimum of three service observations per employee for all eligible employees in any of the months we reviewed. SSA's performance standards require that teleservice center managers complete ongoing performance management activities timely and efficiently. However, those standards do not specify the number of service observations they must complete.

Managers not completing the required number of service observations limited SSA's opportunity to monitor employees and improve the quality of service the Agency provides the public via its 800-number (see Figure 3: 3 for service observation metrics for selected months and Appendix C for service observation metrics for all months from October 2020 to January 2023).

¹¹ We reviewed 200 of the 103,919 calls management observed from March 2020 through June 2021.

¹² Per SSA's *National Service Observation Process Memorandum of Understanding*, Lead Customer Service Representatives may also conduct service observations in addition to teleservice managers.

Figure 3: Percentage of Service Observations SSA Conducted on Eligible 800-number Employees for Selected Months¹³



SSA reported multiple reasons for its inability to complete service observations on all eligible employees, including its national 800-number was understaffed because employees were on weather and safety leave at the beginning of the pandemic, it has to implement workarounds to its legacy telephone systems to accommodate remote operations, and there were stability issues with the platform at times that prevented 800-number employees from answering calls and supervisors from conducting service observations.

While we understand these issues occurred, managers still did not complete the required number of service observations for all eligible 800-number employees in months they did not occur. We were not able to determine why managers did not observe all eligible employees beyond SSA's general explanation of their need to address competing workloads.

¹³ The total percentage for some of the months in Figure 3 may exceed 100 percent due to rounding. For service observation SSA conducted on all eligible 800-number employees from October 2020 through January 2023, refer to Appendix C. SSA provided the information from February 2022 to January 2023. We compiled the information from October 2020 to January 2022 based on the number of employees eligible for service observation and the number of service observation management conducted on these employees, as provided by the Agency. SSA was unable to provide any data before October 2020 because it maintained the data in an older version of the software that it used to record calls. SSA lost the data when it upgraded the software to a new version in October 2020. Also, SSA reported it was unable to record some calls to conduct service observations until a newer version of the software used to record calls became available in the fall 2020. When that software was first implemented, SSA continued to use both the older and newer versions of the software to record calls. The number for October 2020 in Figure 3 only reflects employees whose calls were recorded using the new version of the software.

SSA reported it began distributing a monthly service observation compliance report that each supervisor can access in SSA's systems. SSA believes the report will increase the number of employees who receive the required number of service observations. While SSA has begun distributing the monthly compliance report, it does not include a specific performance standard requiring the completion of the required number of service observations in the performance plans of managers and other staff authorized to complete service observations.¹⁴ We are conducting a separate review of the telephone network outages and expect to issue our report later in 2023.

Speech Analytics Referrals and Agency Intervention

Speech analytics is a method, separate from service observation, designed to improve the efficiency and quality of service 800-number employees provide to the public. SSA's speech analytics technology, which it began using in April 2017, converts recorded 800-number calls to a text format. SSA uses it to pinpoint patterns for further research and analysis via manual process. Employees in the Office of Customer Service and/or teleservice centers apply such criteria as words, phrases, or duration of calls to search the converted text to identify calls that should be referred to regional management for further evaluation. Calls can be identified through speech analytics based on the use of derogatory terms, a disconnected call that did not assist callers, and employees not responding to callers during the call.

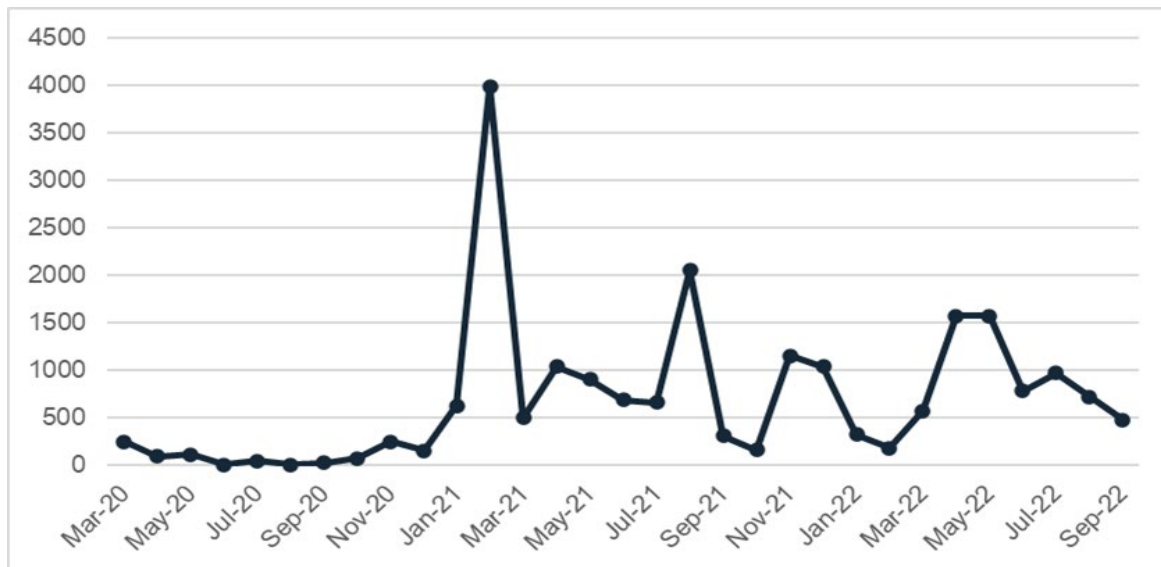
Calls identified as problematic are referred to regional management for further evaluation and action. Regional managers further review referred calls and determine whether the 800-number employees identified through speech analytics should receive coaching, training, counseling or face disciplinary action. SSA follows the procedure and arrangement set forth in the National Agreement between the union and SSA regarding disciplinary action.¹⁵

From March 2020 to September 2022, SSA referred 21,304 calls answered by 800-number employees to regional managers for review. The number of calls identified by speech analytics that were referred to regional managers fluctuated each month (see Figure 4).

¹⁴ SSA's performance plans consist of a defined number of performance elements and performance standards that apply to employees based on the type of position.

¹⁵ Social Security Administration, *Manager's Guide To Service Observation*, p. 9 (September 3, 2020). SSA may investigate before proposing any disciplinary action. Employees may request union representation during the investigation. Disciplinary action includes reprimand, short-term suspension, long term suspension, and removal. SSA may provide counseling and assistance before taking disciplinary action.

Figure 4: Number of Calls identified by Speech Analytics and Referred to Regional Managers—March 2020 to September 2022¹⁶



Per SSA, it could only use speech analytics for calls answered by approximately 1,000 800-number employees from March through October 2020 because it placed the remaining employees on a different telephone system that did not have speech-analytic capabilities. Also, per SSA, the fluctuations in the number of calls identified from November 2020 through September 2022 occurred because employees who were authorized to conduct speech analytics had other workloads to address and did not always have the time or capacity to conduct speech analytics as work priorities shifted.

We identified the 50 employees who were referred most from March 2020 to June 2021: each had 25 to 3,485 calls referred (see Appendix D for the number of referrals for each employee). SSA reported that, at the time of our review, the Agency no longer employed 20 of the 50 employees.¹⁷ The 30 employees who remained employed received, or were receiving, counseling, coaching, training, and/or disciplinary actions.

For the 30 employees who remained employed, Office of Customer Service and/or teleservice center reviewers took between 1 and 125 days to analyze and refer the first call to regional management after it was recorded in SSA's system. Once referred, regional management took between 6 and 490 days to provide intervention to the employees after Office of Customer Service and/or teleservice center reviewers referred the calls for further review. Refer to Appendix D for details.

¹⁶ Per SSA, employees conduct speech analytics as they have the time or see the need to do so; as such, the fluctuation in the number of calls in Figure 3 reflects the inconsistent usage of speech analytics.

¹⁷ Of the 20 employees, 9 resigned, 9 were terminated, and 2 retired.

Many of the employees had additional calls identified through speech analytics between the time of their first problematic call and the first referral to regional management and/or when regional management intervened. Once regional management intervened, employees generally had fewer additional speech analytic referrals, though some employees required multiple interventions. SSA policy did not specify a time frame on when regional management should intervene to improve the quality of service provided by 800-number employees referred by speech analytics. However, its agreement with the union calls for SSA to provide timely action after it was notified of employee behavior that required correction and improvement.

We shared this analysis with SSA. In response, SSA stated multiple network outages during our review period affected management's ability to provide timely intervention on speech-analytic referrals.

Modernized Development Worksheets

SSA employees use MDWs to transfer and monitor requests for action between its national 800-number, field offices, and processing centers. SSA employees manually input MDW requests with the beneficiary's Social Security number, a routine or high-priority designation, and a message describing the issue. Beneficiaries may have more than one MDW request created on their records. Per SSA policy, employees should only send MDW requests when they are asking other components to take an action; they should not use MDW requests to provide other components with information. Other component employees who receive MDW requests should record the dates within the MDW system when the requested actions have been completed.

According to SSA, its goal is to resolve routine MDW requests within 60 days and high-priority MDW requests within 20 days.¹⁸ SSA distinguishes these timeframes as goals, not requirements, because some MDW requests require additional development. MDW requests remain pending until employees close them in the system.

In a previous audit, we concluded that SSA did not effectively control high-priority MDWs to ensure they were resolved timely and accurately.¹⁹ We reached a similar conclusion per our review of multiple samples of MDWs created by 800-number employees to address callers' requests.

¹⁸ SSA, *POMS*, GN 01070.400 B (October 12, 2011). High-priority development requests are limited to the following situations: award and disallowance situations; start- and stop-payment actions; appeal situations; and congressional inquiries or public-relations problems.

¹⁹ SSA, OIG, *The Social Security Administration's Controls over High-priority Modernized Development Worksheets*, A-07-18-50363 (September 2021).

Modernized Development Worksheets Created by 800-number Employees

We reviewed the following random samples to obtain a broad view of MDW requests created by 800-number employees throughout the pandemic:

- 50 of closed MDW requests from 253,542 beneficiaries' records that were created from April 2020 to June 2021;²⁰
- 50 of 1,806 pending MDW requests as of the end of July 2021 that were created from April to June 2020;²¹ and
- 50 of 68,548 pending MDW requests as of the end of July 2021 that were created from July 2020 to June 2021.²²

As of January 2022, 93 of these 150 MDW requests (62 percent) were either pending or resolved by SSA longer than 60 days after 800-number employees sent them to the processing centers or the field offices.

Additionally, for 12 MDW requests (8 percent), 800-number employees unnecessarily created MDWs when they could have resolved the callers' requests without doing so, and/or the other component employees who received the MDW requests closed them without taking all the actions requested. Examples include the following:

- An 800-number employee referred an MDW request to a local field office to mail a benefit verification letter to a caller when the employee could have initiated the process to have the letter mailed or instructed the caller to obtain the letter from [my Social Security](#).²³ Unneeded MDW requests create unnecessary workloads for other SSA components and lead to less timely customer service.
- An 800-number employee referred an MDW request to a processing center in June 2021 in response to a caller's request for an explanation of an overpayment. The MDW request was closed the next day, but the action needed to address the callers' request was never taken.

²⁰ An MDW can have more than one request listed. We identified 253,542 beneficiaries' records with MDW requests created from April 2020 to June 2021 that were closed from April 2020 to July 2021. Some of the 253,542 beneficiaries may have had more than 1 MDW request created on their record, and not all MDW requests were created by 800-number employees. If there were more than one MDW request on the same benefit record, we reviewed the MDW request created by an 800-number employee.

²¹ We identified the 1,806 pending MDW requests from 1,703 beneficiaries' records.

²² We identified the 68,548 pending MDW requests from 62,275 beneficiaries' records.

²³ An online account from SSA's official Website that provides personalized tools for beneficiaries and the general public. An individual may request a benefit verification letter, check the status of an application, estimate future benefits or manage the benefits received in [my Social Security](#).

- An 800-number employee created a high-priority MDW request in June 2020 in response to a caller's report that her parents, both Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients, traveled outside of the United States. She could not provide a date of return for them. As of September 2022, the MDW request remained pending. We found additional remarks in SSA records that indicated the initial caller's mother contacted SSA in January 2021 to report that she and her husband traveled outside the United States in December 2020. The caller stated she did not know when they would return and requested that SSA suspend their SSI payments. SSA records show employees did not stop the parents' SSI payments for any period after the caller's initial contact in June 2020, and SSA continued sending SSI payments to the recipients even though they were not eligible because they were outside the United States for a full calendar month or 30 consecutive days or longer.

Multiple Modernized Development Worksheet Requests for the Same Issue

To further review the impact of MDWs closed prematurely or not processed timely, we reviewed from the population of closed MDW requests an additional 40 cases that involved individuals who called the 800-number multiple times to address the same concern. We also reviewed from the population of pending MDW requests another 40 cases that involved those who called the 800-number multiple times to address the same concern. For the closed MDWs, individuals called the 800-number from 2 to 12 times to address the same issues. For each call, an employee created a new MDW request, which resulted in 2 to 12 MDW requests for the same issue. For the 40 cases with pending MDWs, individuals called the 800-number two to five times to address the same issue, which resulted in employees creating two to five MDW requests for the same issue. For both groups, the issues the callers were trying to address included claim status, changes to direct deposit information, Medicare-related issues, representative payee changes, and over- or underpayments.

Of the multiple closed MDW requests employees created for the same issue, we found other SSA components closed the MDWs each time shortly after they were created without fully resolving the issues. The callers continued contacting the 800-number and/or field offices, which created subsequent MDW requests for the same issues. Many of the subsequent requests were designated as high-priority. On average, SSA took 235 days to resolve the callers' requests noted in the initial MDWs.²⁴ For 20 of the 40 benefit records, the callers contacted the 800-number regarding underpayments due them. In one such case, employees created eight MDW requests based on the caller's multiple contacts to the 800-number and the field office over a 1-year period regarding the status of a \$67,000 underpayment before SSA released the payment.²⁵

²⁴ We determined the number of days by comparing the initial request date of the MDW to the date SSA fully resolved the issue. As of February 2022, SSA had not fully resolved one caller's request. It fully resolved the remaining 39 callers' requests but took the actions between 26 to 480 days after the request dates.

²⁵ Of the eight MDW requests, seven were designated as high priority. An MDW request was created on July 27, 2020 to the processing center to reflect the caller's inquiry regarding an underpayment. The processing center closed the MDW request on July 28, 2020 without resolving the caller's request. Seven subsequent MDW requests were created for the same issue on August 25, 2020 (closed August 26, 2020), September 9, 2020 (closed September 10, 2020), September 18, 2020 (closed September 21, 2020), December 10, 2020 (closed December 11, 2020), December 31, 2020 (closed January 29, 2021), March 17, 2021 (closed March 18, 2021), May 11, 2021 (closed May 12, 2021). The processing center released the underpayment in August 2021.

As SSA does not retain MDWs 120 days after they are closed, it limits management's ability to monitor whether employees timely and accurately resolved the requests. Additionally, employees may lose the opportunity to obtain information from the MDW system if an individual contacts SSA regarding the same issue after 120 days.

Our review of records with multiple pending MDW requests found that 800-number employees created multiple MDW requests at different times to reflect the same issues by the callers. In some cases, SSA did not take action to resolve the issues and left the MDW requests pending; the callers continued to contact the 800-number and employees continued to create subsequent MDW requests. Some of the subsequent requests were designated as high priority. As of February 2022, the MDW requests remained pending in 20 of the 40 records. In 11 of the 20 records, the issues from the MDW requests remained relevant.²⁶ On average, for these 11 records, the first MDW request created based on the caller's initial contact had been unresolved for 404 days.²⁷

800-number Employees' Experiences During the Pandemic

In April 2022, we surveyed 4,646 800-number employees about their work experience while teleworking full-time and their thoughts on issues that affected the services they provided.²⁸ We received 1,720 responses. Most employees who responded indicated they received the training necessary to perform their jobs after they began teleworking full-time, and they were satisfied with the technical support they received. Most employees who responded stated they could the same level of service to callers after they began teleworking. A minority of employees who responded indicated they could not provide the same level of service to callers because the telephone system was unstable, and they could not print, fax, and mail documents requested by the callers. (See Appendix C for our survey questions and the responses we received.)

CONCLUSIONS

SSA needs to improve oversight over the service its employees provide when engaging with customers calling the 800-number. Management not completing the required number of service observations each month and not timely intervening with employees identified through speech analytics limited SSA's opportunity to monitor employees and improve the quality of service it provides the public via its 800-number. Addressing customer service issues timely helps prevent future issues that require intervention. Additionally, when employees do not effectively or correctly process MDWs 800-number employees used to communicate needed actions with other components, it hinders SSA's ability to provide quality service to callers.

²⁶ In 9 of the 20 records, the issues noted in the MDWs were no longer relevant based on subsequent developments. For example, 800-number employees created three MDW requests to the field office to reflect a caller's request to withhold tax from his Social Security Benefits in February, April, and June 2021. The field office did not close these MDW requests. However, other SSA records indicated the field office processed the tax withholding in August 2021. Therefore, we believe the issue requested by the caller is no longer relevant.

²⁷ Based on our findings related to MDWs in this report, we began a broader review of SSA's processing of MDWs, which was ongoing as of the date of this report. This report does not contain recommendations related to MDWs as the broader report will recommend any corrective action needed.

²⁸ Per SSA, there were 4,646 800-number employees as of April 2022.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend SSA:

1. Create a performance standard that requires that teleservice center managers and other employees who conduct service observations conduct a minimum of three service observations for each qualified 800-number employee per month, as required by SSA policy.
2. Create policy to ensure all problematic calls identified through speech analytics are referred to regional management and regional management intervenes with the 800-number employees referred within defined timeframes to ensure prompt interventions address problematic and/or inadequate customer service.

AGENCY COMMENTS AND OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL RESPONSE

SSA disagreed with our recommendations. Regarding Recommendation 1, SSA noted it has begun distributing a monthly service observation compliance report to managers. SSA believes the compliance report "...will promote visibility of the issue with regional leadership and support a process centered around accountability." While the compliance report may increase visibility, it does not require that managers conduct the required minimum of three service observations for each qualified 800-number employee per month. We continue to believe a performance standard is needed.

In response to Recommendation 2, SSA stated its managers handle referrals on a case-by-case basis because of a multitude of factors. We found many employees had additional problematic calls identified through speech analytics after their first referral to regional management but before management's initial intervention. Once regional management intervened, employees generally had fewer additional referrals, demonstrating the importance of the timeliness of interventions. We continue to believe SSA needs to establish defined timeframes for when management interventions should occur.

See Appendix F for the full text of the Agency's comments.



Michelle L. Anderson
Assistant Inspector General for Audit

APPENDICES

Appendix A –SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

To accomplish our objective, we:

- Reviewed applicable Social Security Administration (SSA) regulations, rules, policies, and procedures.
- Obtained and summarized SSA's performance data and customer service management information for national 800-number telephone calls from April 2020 to March 2022. The data included the total number of calls, number of calls that received a busy message, number of calls handled by 800-number employees, rate of answer and average speed of answer. We used this information to provide a general sense of 800-number operations as reported by SSA. We did not evaluate the underlying data itself.
- Obtained data on 16,512 calls recorded in a prior version of the 800-number-related software, from March through October 2020 and 87,407 calls recorded primarily in the current version of the software, from November 2020 through June 2021. SSA provided us access to both versions of the software. We identified a population of 16,512 calls with an audio file retained in the system (not all service observations had an audio file attached).¹ We randomly sampled 100 calls from each time period, listened to the sampled calls, and reviewed SSA's comments on the service observation forms to determine whether 800-number employees provided quality service to callers.
- Obtained data on 9,334 calls answered by 759 national 800-number employees from March 2020 through June 2021 that were identified as problematic through SSA's speech analytics review and referred to SSA regional management for further action. We selected the 50 employees who had the most calls referred and asked SSA to provide information on the actions it took in response.
- We obtained data on 253,542 closed and 70,354 pending (as of the end of July 2021) Modernized Development Worksheets (MDW) created from April 2020 through June 2021. An MDW can have more than one issue listed. MDWs are not retained in the MDW system when all issues listed were closed and the most recent close date is more than 120 days in the past. The closed cases we selected were those created from April 2020 through June 2021 that were closed from April 2020 through July 2021.
 - Randomly sampled and reviewed 50 of the 253,542 closed MDWs that were created by 800-number employees. We used key words to identify MDWs likely established by the 800-number employees. If, upon review of an MDW selected for our sample, it appeared the MDW was not established by an 800-number employee, we selected a replacement sample item.

¹ Per SSA, observers may perform service observations on recorded calls or live calls (side-by-side). In latter scenario, the observer must listen to the employee's interaction in real-time and simultaneously complete the service observation form. The observer would then be required to go back into the 800-number program to search for the call and manually attach it to the completed service observation form. If the evaluator fails to properly attach the call to the form, the service observation will not have a corresponding audio file. Additionally, there have been instances where the audio file is unavailable because of technology or storage capacity issues.

- From the 70,354 pending MDWs, we randomly sampled and reviewed 50 of the 1,806 pending MDWs 800-number employees created from April to June 2020 and 50 of the 68,548 pending MDWs created from July 2020 to June 2021. We used key words to identify MDWs likely established by 800-number employees. If, upon review of an MDW selected for our sample, it appeared the MDW was not established by an 800-number employee, we selected a replacement sample item.
- Reviewed 40 cases that involved individuals who called the 800-number multiple times to address the same concern from the closed MDW population and 40 cases that involved multiple MDWs being created by 800-number employees to address the same issues from the pending MDW population.
- Issued a survey to 800-number employees about their work experiences during the pandemic to a mailing list of 4,646 800-number employees as of the month we sent the survey (April 2022), which SSA provided us. Of the 1,720 employees who responded, 1,621 responded their job position or role include answering calls and providing service through SSA's national 800-number.

We assessed the significance of internal controls necessary to satisfy the audit objective. This included an assessment of the five internal control components, including control environment, risk assessment, control activities, information and communication, and monitoring. In addition, we reviewed the principles of internal controls as associated with the audit objective. We identified the following three components and seven principles as significant to the audit objective.

- Component 1: Control Environment
 - Principle 2: Exercise Oversight Responsibility
 - Principle 3: Establish Structure, Responsibility, and Authority
- Component 3: Control Activities
 - Principle 10: Design Control Activities
 - Principle 11: Design Activities for the Information System
 - Principle 12: Implement Control Activities
- Component 5: Monitoring
 - Principle 16: Perform Monitoring Activities
 - Principle 17: Remediate Deficiencies

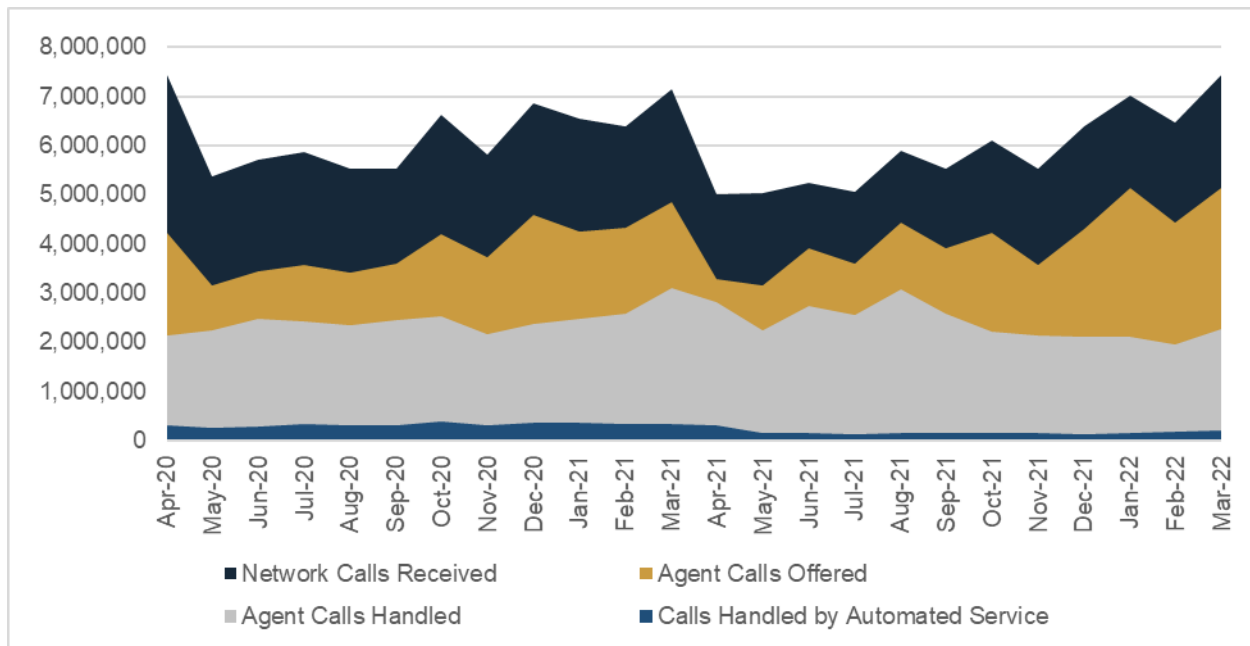
We conducted our review between August 2021 and July 2022. We assessed the reliability of the data by (1) reviewing existing information about the data and the system that produced them (2) tracing a statistically random sample of data to source documents and (3) interviewing subject-matter experts about the data. We found the data used for this audit to be sufficiently reliable to meet our audit objective. Further, any data limitations were minor in the context of this assignment, and the use of the data should not lead to an incorrect or unintentional conclusion. The principal entity audited was the Office of Operations under the Office of the Deputy Commissioner for Operations.

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and conduct the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We believe the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective.

Appendix B –NATIONAL 800-NUMBER PERFORMANCE METRICS (APRIL 2020 TO MARCH 2022)

We obtained the data in these figures from the Social Security Administration (SSA). We did not independently verify the underlying data used for these figures.

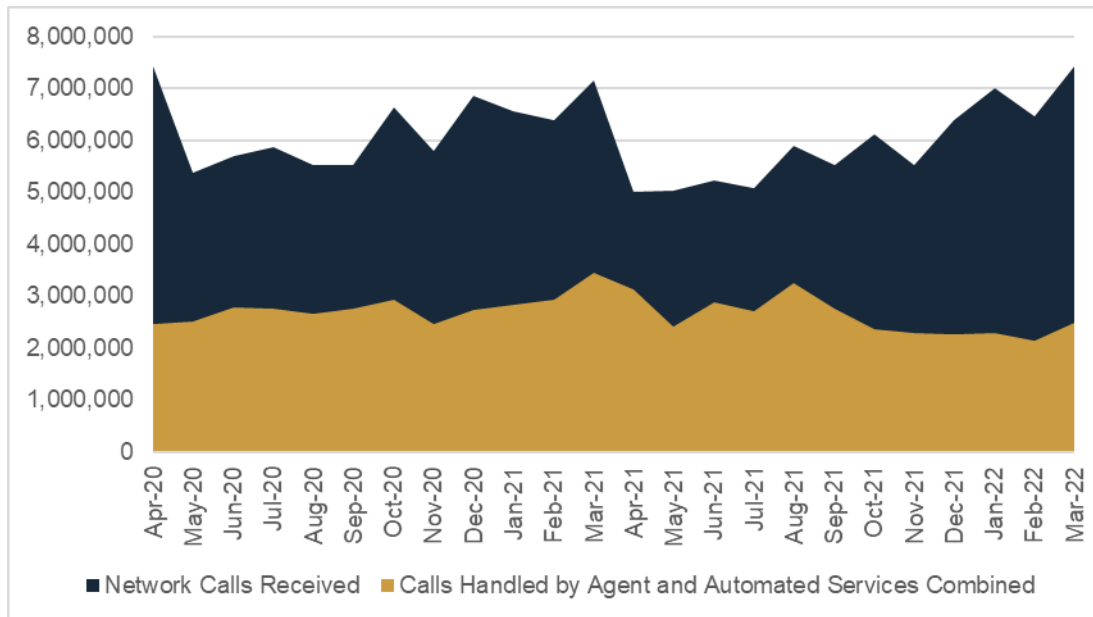
Figure B–1: National 800-number Call Pattern¹



Source: SSA's Office of Customer Service Management Information.

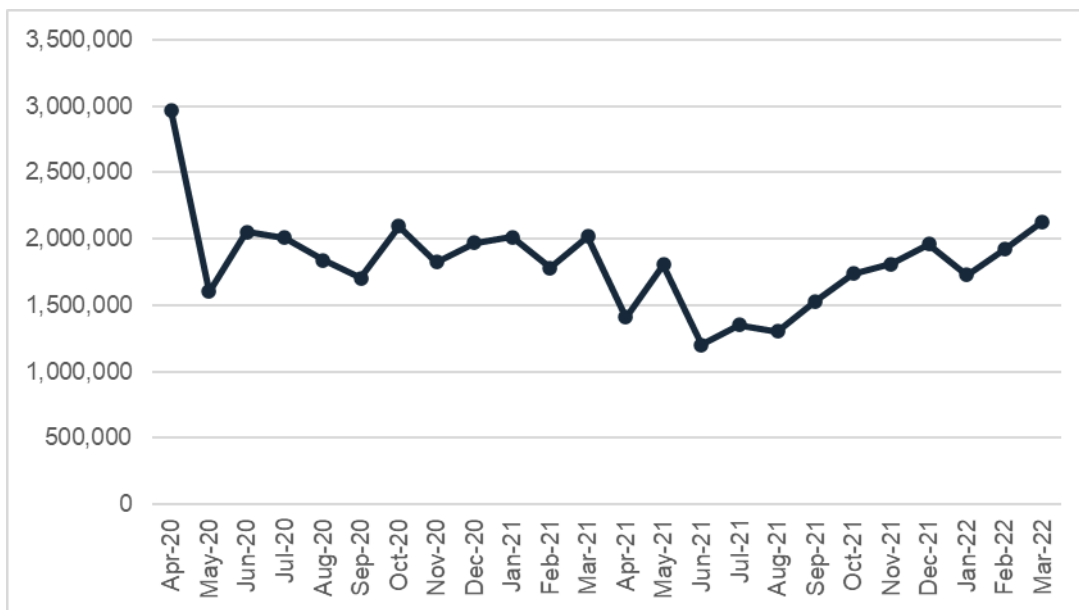
¹ Per SSA, it has not been able to validate the calls handled by automated services since May 2021 after it transitioned to a different telephone platform.

Figure B-2: Network Calls Received But Not Handled



Source: SSA's Office of Customer Service Management Information.

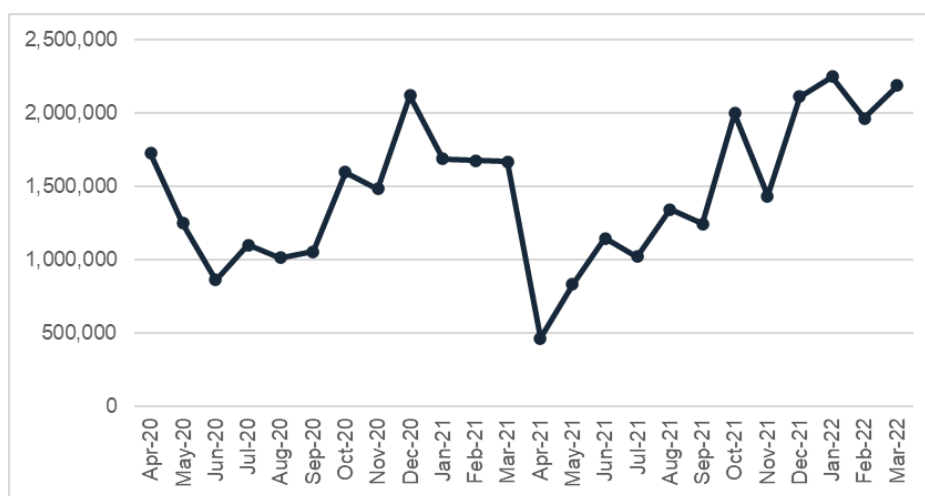
Figure B-3: National 800-number calls Abandoned in Menu²



Source: SSA's Office of Customer Service Management Information.

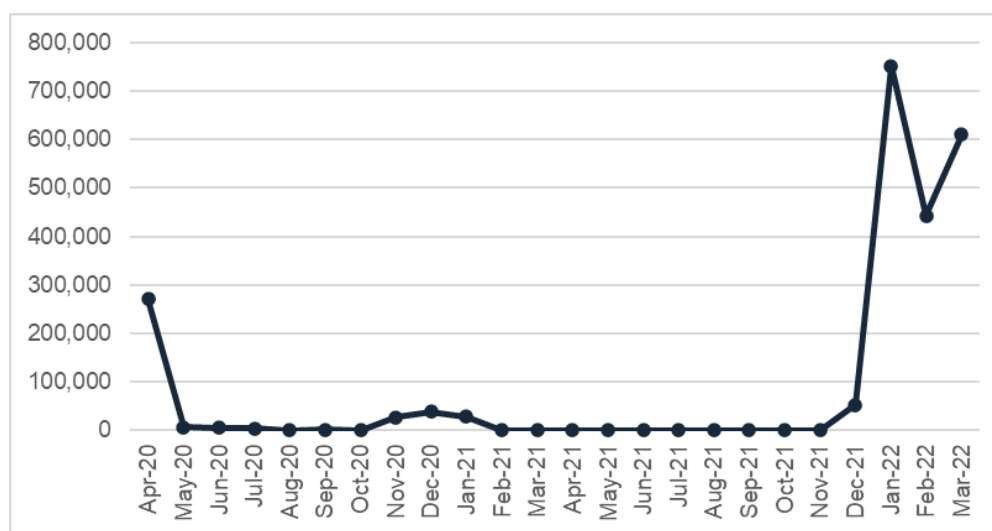
² Callers to the national 800-number abandon calls in menus when they hang up while using automated services.

Figure B-4: National 800-number calls Abandoned in Queue³



Source: SSA's Office of Customer Service Management Information.

Figure B-5: 800-number Calls that Received Busy Messages⁴

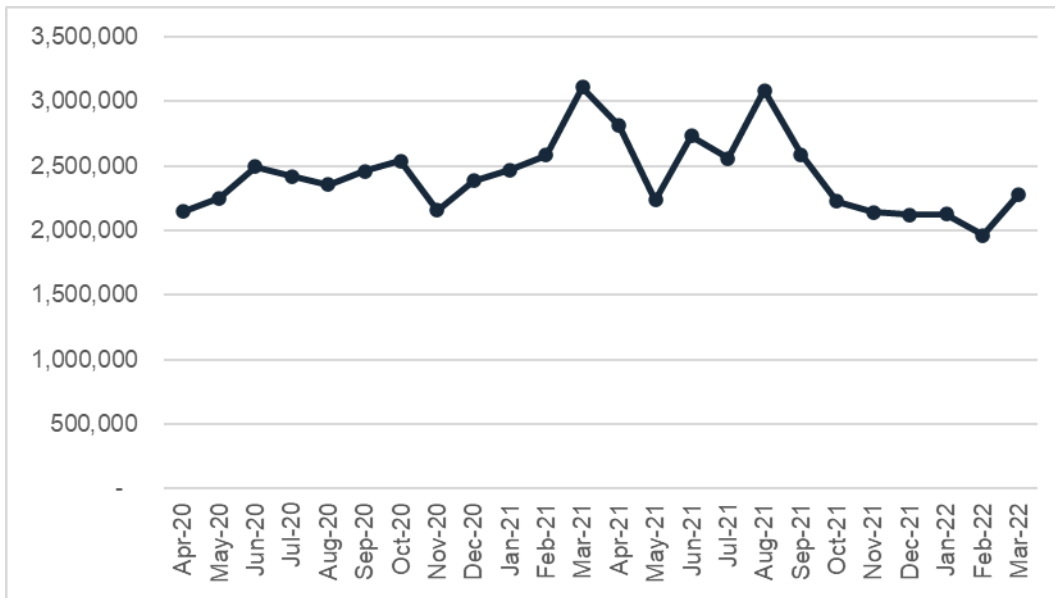


³ Callers to the national 800-number abandon calls in queue when they hang up while waiting to speak to an 800-number employee.

⁴ In January 2022, busy messages peaked for the national 800-number. While SSA was operating under two telephone platforms for the national 800-number, from April 2020 to May 2021, it could allow more callers to enter the telephone queue without generating busy messages, which led to minimal busy messages during this time. From May through November 2021, SSA was primarily on one network while it transitioned to the Unification platform. During that time, when a service disruption occurred, some callers were disconnected before they entered the national 800-number queue or experienced extended wait times while employees were unable to log-in to telephone systems to take calls. Thus, although SSA maintained zero busy messages, service disruptions kept callers from connecting with an SSA employee. As busy messages started to increase, in February 2022 SSA capped the number of callers allowed to enter the telephone queue to avoid service disruptions. Once SSA put the call limit in place, if the limit was reached, a caller would get a busy message.

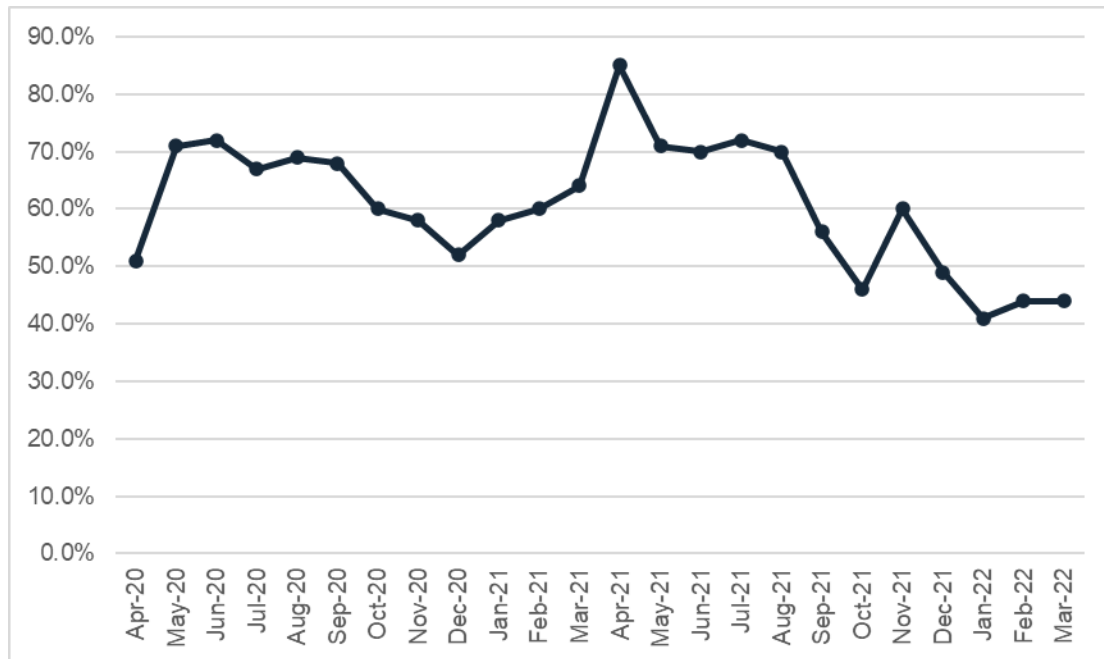
Source: SSA's Office of Customer Service Management Information.

Figure B-6: Calls Handled by 800-number Employees



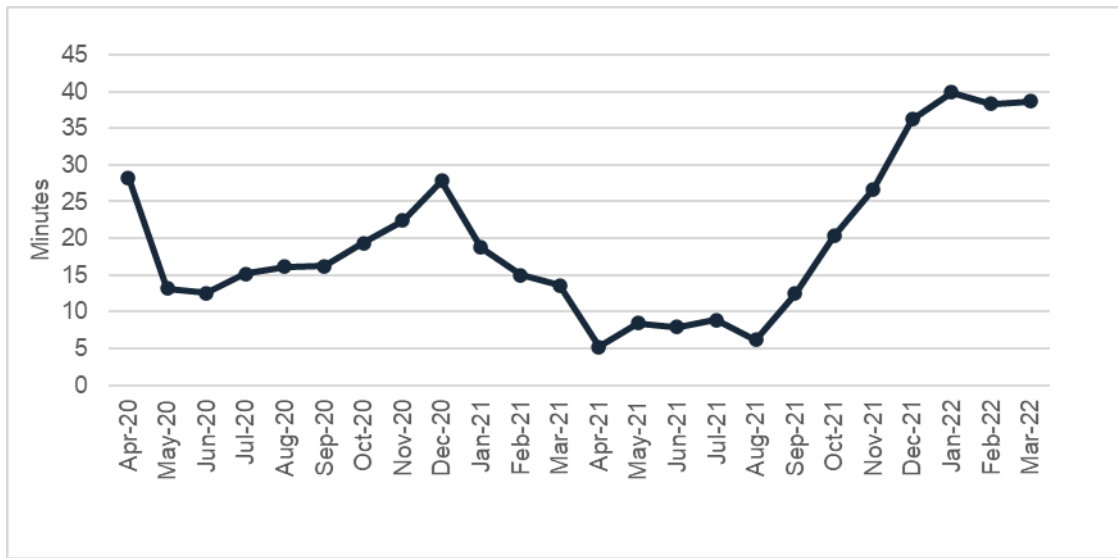
Source: SSA's Office of Customer Service Management Information.

Figure B-7: National-800 number Employee Answer Rate



Source: SSA's Office of Customer Service Management Information.

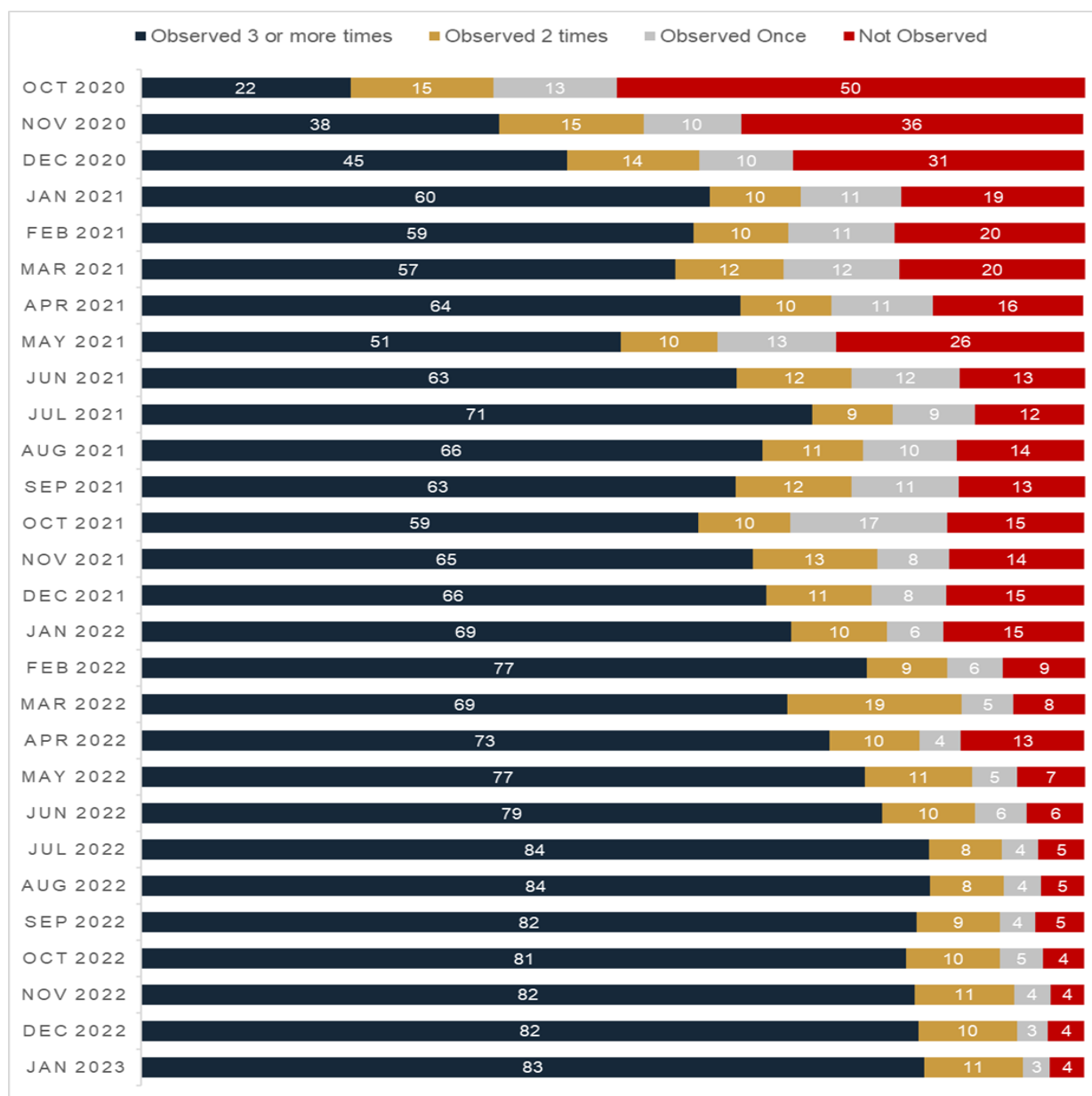
Figure B–8: National 800-number Average Speed of Answer



Source: SSA's Office of Customer Service Management Information.

Appendix C –SERVICE OBSERVATIONS CONDUCTED (OCTOBER 2020 TO JANUARY 2023)

Figure C–1: Percentage of Service Observations the Social Security Administration Conducted on Eligible 800-number Employees¹



¹ The total percentage for some of the months may exceed 100 percent due to rounding.

Appendix D –SPEECH ANALYTIC REVIEW AND REGIONAL INTERVENTION (MARCH 2020 TO JUNE 2021)

Figure D–1: Timeliness of the Social Security Administration’s (SSA) Speech Analytic Review and Regional Intervention for Calls Recorded—March 2020 Through June 2021

Employee	Number of Identified Calls ¹	Days Between First Call Identified and First Referral to Regional Management ²	Number of Additional Calls After First Identified Call and Before First Referral to Region	Days Between First Referral and First Regional Intervention	Number of Calls Identified After First Call Referred and Before First Intervention	Number of Calls Identified After Latest Intervention
1	3,485	125	3,398	6	2	0
2	532	1	0	30	0	0
3	312	73	311	Ongoing ³		
4	277	42	210	Ongoing		
5	97	27	79	211	9	0
6	81	15	0	252	79	0
7	79	36	68	25	9	0
8	77	10	0	109	75	0
9	75	4	15	51	59	0
10	74	27	15	490	59	0
11	72	42	20	178	30	0
12	64	4	0	6	0	1
13	58	13	0	30	0	0
14	56	42	51	20	0	0
15	55	22	27	283	27	0
16	53	63	44	No intervention ⁴		
17	47	7	13	336	45	0
18	45	8	33	106	5	0
19	42	4	0	71	8	0

¹ This is the total number of calls identified by speech analytics from March 2020 through June 2021.

² This is the number of days between (1) the date of the first incoming call in our audit period identified by a reviewer as problematic using speech analytics and (2) the earliest date the reviewer referred a call to regional management.

³ SSA is providing ongoing intervention to Employees 3, 4, 24, 27, and 28. It did not provide specific dates of the intervention.

⁴ SSA stated it provided the last intervention to this employee in March 2021. The first speech analytics referral of this employee in our audit period to regional management was on May 3, 2021, for a call the employee answered on March 1, 2021.

Employee	Number of Identified Calls ¹	Days Between First Call Identified and First Referral to Regional Management ²	Number of Additional Calls After First Identified Call and Before First Referral to Region	Days Between First Referral and First Regional Intervention	Number of Calls Identified After First Call Referred and Before First Intervention	Number of Calls Identified After Latest Intervention
20	37	9	0	130	24	0
21	32	2	0	186	31	0
22	30	3	0	105	28	0
23	29	40	0	346	25	3
24	29	19	7	ongoing		
25	28	60	0	304	28	0
26	28	14	9	335	13	0
27	27	28	24	ongoing		
28	27	4	7	ongoing		
29	25	6	11	no intervention ⁵		
30	25	67	24	62	1	0

⁵ SSA stated speech-analytic referred calls that were answered by this employee because of technical issues. Therefore, it did not provide any intervention.

Appendix E –SURVEY RESPONSES

The following provides the number of 800-number employees who were presented with each question, the response rate for each question, and their answers. Note that some of the response rates do not total the number of survey participants, as participants were only offered the option to answer some questions, based on the relevancy of them based on their response to prior ones. Additionally, survey participants were not required to answer each question presented, to continue through the survey.

1. Does your job position or role include answering calls and providing service through the Social Security Administration's (SSA) national 800-Number?

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
1720	1720	100.00%

Answer	Count	Percentage
Yes	1621	94.2%
No (skip to question 23)	99	5.8%

2. Since December 1, 2021, have you had to request support from the Voice Network Operations Center (VNOC) help desk at 1-877-718-0058 while you were teleworking?

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
1621	1621	100.00%

Answer	Count	Percentage
Yes	653	40.3%
No (skip to question 9)	968	59.7%

3. Why did you request VNOC support? (check all that apply)

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
653	653	100.00%

Answer	Count	Percentage
Avaya 2050 softphone login/configuration issue	457	70.0%
Workspace login/configuration issue (i.e., encountering a systems error)	516	79.0%
Call quality/audio problem (i.e., dead air call)	297	45.5%
Connectivity/dropped call problem	302	46.2%
Inability to transfer calls	103	15.8%
Other reason(s)	68	10.4%

4. Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the VNOC (help desk) support you received?

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
653	653	100.00%

Answer	Count	Percentage
Satisfied (Skip to Question 6)	448	68.6%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (Skip to Question 6)	150	23.0%
Dissatisfied	55	8.4%

5. Please explain why you were dissatisfied with the VNOC support you received?

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
55	55	100.00%

Answer	Count	Percentage
Discourteous response	1	1.8%
VNOC support did not solve the problem	30	54.5%
VNOC support did not answer my request or VNOC support response took too long	13	23.6%
Other reason(s)	11	20.0%

6. Did the reason(s) you requested VNOC support impact your ability to complete your job duties?

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
653	653	100.00%

Answer	Count	Percentage
No (skip to question 9)	101	15.5%
Yes	552	84.5%

7. Please describe how the reason(s) you requested VNOc support impacted your ability to complete your job duties?

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
552	551	99.8%

Answer	Count	Percentage
Impacted my ability to answer N8NN calls	393	71.3%
Impacted my ability to support other staff	20	3.6%
Impacted my ability to answer N8NN calls and support other staff	117	21.2%
Other reason(s)	21	3.8%

8. How long did it take VNOc support to resolve the latest reason you contacted it about?

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
653	653	100.00%

Answer	Count	Percentage
0 to 30 minutes	305	46.7%
31 minutes to 1 hour	151	23.1%
1 to 2 hours	129	19.8%
Longer than 2 hours	68	10.4%

9. Since December 1, 2021, have you had to request informational technology (IT) support other than VNOc support while you were teleworking?

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
1621	1621	100.00%

Answer	Count	Percentage
No (skip to question 16)	641	39.5%
Yes	980	60.5%

10. Why did you request IT support? (check all that apply)

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
980	980	100.00%

Answer	Count	Percentage
Laptop login/configuration issue	601	61.3%
VPN issue	629	64.2%
CHIP issue	367	37.4%
Phone Systems Problems (i.e., call quality issues)	578	59.0%
Other reason(s)	134	13.7%

11. Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the IT support you received?

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
980	980	100.00%

Answer	Count	Percentage
Satisfied (skip to question 13)	769	78.5%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (skip to question 13)	164	16.7%
Dissatisfied	47	4.8%

12. Please explain why you were dissatisfied with the IT support you received.

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
47	47	100.0%

Answer	Count	Percentage
Discourteous response	5	10.6%
IT support did not resolve the problem	18	38.3%
IT support did not answer my request or IT support response took too long	15	31.9%
Other reasons	9	19.1%

13. Did the reason(s) you requested IT support impact your ability to complete your job duties?

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
980	980	100.00%

Answer	Count	Percentage
No (skip to question 15)	126	12.9%
Yes	854	87.1%

14. Please describe how the reason(s) you requested IT support impacted your ability to complete your job duties.

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
854	854	100.0%

Answer	Count	Percentage
Impacted my ability to answer N8NN calls	577	67.6%
Impacted my ability to support other staff	26	3.0%
Impacted my ability to answer N8NN calls and support other staff	205	24.0%
Other reason(s)	46	5.4%

15. How long did it take VNOC support to resolve the latest reason you contacted it about?

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
980	980	100.00%

Answer	Count	Percentage
0 to 30 minutes	578	59.0%
31 minutes to 1 hour	215	21.9%
1 to 2 hours	121	12.3%
Longer than 2 hours	66	6.7%

16. Since beginning full-time telework in March 2020, have you received all of the training you need to help you better perform your duties?

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
1621	1621	100.00%

Answer	Count	Percentage
Yes (skip to question 18)	1268	78.2%
No	353	21.8%

17. What additional trainings do you think would help you better perform your duties? (check all that apply)

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
353	353	100.00%
Answer		Count
		Percentage
SSA policies and procedures		220
		62.3%
800-number software version 15		122
		34.6%
Softphones		132
		37.4%
eLAS ¹		103
		29.2%
CHIP ²		129
		36.5%
Customer service training		93
		26.3%
Other		113
		32.0%

18. Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the training you received while teleworking?

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
1621	1621	100.00%

Answer	Count	Percentage
Satisfied (skip to question 20)	880	54.3%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (Skip to Question 20)	547	33.7%
Dissatisfied	194	12.0%

19. Please explain why you were dissatisfied with the training you received.³

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
1621	1621	100.00%

¹ eLAS is a Web-based appointment system used by the 800-number employees to schedule appointments for claims and referrals with local servicing field offices. Employees may also use the system to answer public inquiries about scheduled appointments or to make changes to the appointments.

² CHIP is an intranet application currently used by the 800 Number employees to respond to inquiries made by the public.

³ The 194 employees provided their responses in free text.

20. Prior to full-time telework beginning in March 2020 due to the pandemic, did you work in-person at a teleservice center?

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
1621	1621	100.00%

Answer	Count	Percentage
No (skip to question 23)	519	32.0%
Yes	1102	68.0%

21. Please answer whether you agree or disagree with the following statement - When I telework, I am able to provide the same level of service to callers I did when I worked in the office.

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
1102	1102	100.00%

Answer	Count	Percentage
Agree (skip to question 23)	976	88.6%
Disagree	126	11.4%

22. Please explain why you are unable to provide the same level of service to callers than you did when you worked in the office. (check all that apply)

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
126	126	100.00%

Answer	Count	Percentage
Phone system is unstable	68	54.0%
Lack of in-person support from mentor/lead/supervisor	32	25.4%
Lack of updated procedures	34	27.0%
Loss of my phone statistics and satisfaction scores	16	12.7%
Frequent loss of internet connection	42	33.3%
Other reason(s)	80	63.5%

23. Please indicate the teleservice center of which you currently work.

Presented	Responses	Response Percentage
1720	1720	100.00%
Answer	Count	Percentage
Albuquerque, NM TSC	179	10.4%
Arlington, TX TSC	31	1.8%
Auburn, WA TSC	118	6.9%
Baltimore, MD TSC	192	11.2%
Bay Area, CA TSC	29	1.7%
Birmingham, AL TSC	164	9.5%
Chicago, IL TSC	80	4.7%
Cincinnati, OH TSC	7	0.4%
Detroit, MI TSC	24	1.4%
Ft Lauderdale, FL TSC	39	2.3%
Hackensack, NJ TSC	4	0.2%
Honolulu, HI TSC	7	0.4%
Houston, TX TSC	31	1.8%
Jamaica, NY TSC	103	6.0%
Kansas City, MO TSC	84	4.9%
Los Angeles, CA TSC	36	2.1%
Philadelphia, PA TSC	82	4.8%
Phoenix, AZ TSC	32	1.9%
Salinas, CA TSC	99	5.8%
San Juan, PR TSC	3	0.2%
Tampa, FL TSC	31	1.8%
Wilkes-Barre, PA TSC	293	17.0%
Richmond, CA TSC	41	2.4%
ODO/ Security West TSC	11	0.6%

Appendix F –AGENCY COMMENTS



SOCIAL SECURITY

MEMORANDUM

Date: August 2, 2023

Refer To: TQA-1

To: Gail S. Ennis
Inspector General

From: Scott Frey 
Chief of Staff

Subject: Office of the Inspector General Draft Report “Controls Over the Social Security Administration's National 800-Number During the COVID-19 Pandemic” (A-02-21-51079)—INFORMATION

Thank you for the opportunity to review the draft report. Please see our detailed comments in the attached document.

Please let me know if I can be of further assistance. You may direct staff inquiries to Trae Sommer at (410) 965-9102.

Attachment

**SSA COMMENTS ON THE OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL DRAFT REPORT
“CONTROLS OVER THE SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION'S NATIONAL 800-
NUMBER DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC” (A-02-21-51079)**

GENERAL COMMENTS

The COVID-19 pandemic posed unique challenges for the National 800-number, including inefficiencies caused by operating across two telephone platforms, disruptions from transitioning to a unified telephone platform, and intermittently losing access to oversight and management information tools (including call recording). We have addressed these challenges, and we are working steadily to implement a telephone platform that includes the tools necessary to provide quality customer service and track the performance of National 800-number employees.

We note our responses to the recommendations below.

Recommendation 1

Create a performance standard that requires that teleservice center managers and other employees who conduct service observations conduct a minimum of three service observations for each qualified 800-number employee per month, as required by SSA policy.

Response

We disagree. During the COVID-19 pandemic, supervisors and support staff who normally conducted service observations, handled connectivity issues and system problems to enable employees to answer incoming calls. As our telephone system stabilized, we steadily increased the number of service observations for each employee. To ensure we continue to increase the number of service observations, we recently began distributing a monthly service observation compliance report to managers in each National 800-number site. We expect the new compliance report will promote visibility of the issue with regional leadership and support a process centered around accountability.

Recommendation 2

Create policy to ensure all problematic calls identified through speech analytics are referred to regional management and regional management intervenes with the 800-number employees referred within defined timeframes to ensure prompt interventions address problematic and/or inadequate customer service.

Response

We disagree. The responsible management official reviews each referred call and, with advice from labor and employee relations staff and the Office of the General Counsel, determines the appropriate action. Managers handle each referral on a case-by-case basis. The timeline for each action depends on the circumstances of the referral, the amount of evidence needed, the availability of the employee, and other factors.

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