



Office of the Inspector General

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Audit Report

Safety of Employees and Visitors Since March 2020

A-15-21-51103 February 2022



Office of the Inspector General

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

February 2022

The Honorable John B. Larson
Chair, Subcommittee on
Social Security
Committee on Ways and Means
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Tom Reed
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on
Social Security
Committee on Ways and Means
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chair Larson and Ranking Member Reed:

In an August 7, 2020 letter, you asked that we review issues related to the Social Security Administration's (SSA) handling of safety of employees and visitors during in-person appointments after it closed field offices on March 17, 2020.

On June 16, 2021, we published an [interim response](#) of our preliminary observations. The enclosed report provides our final observations of our completed work on how the SSA handled the safety of employees and visitors during in-person appointments after March 17, 2020. The report highlights various facts pertaining to the issues raised in your letter. To ensure SSA is aware of the information provided to your office, we are forwarding a copy of this report to the Agency.

Thank you for bringing your concerns to my attention. If you have any questions concerning this matter, please call me or have your staff contact Tamara Schulman, Deputy Chief Strategy Officer at tamara.schulman@ssa.gov.

Sincerely,

Gail S. Ennis
Inspector General

Enclosure



Office of the Inspector General

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

MEMORANDUM

Date: February 24, 2022

Refer To: A-15-21-51103

To: Kilolo Kijakazi
Acting Commissioner

From: Gail S. Ennis, 
Inspector General

Subject: Safety of Employees and Visitors Since March 2020

The attached final report presents the results of the Office of Audit's review. The objective was to respond to questions from the Subcommittee on Social Security regarding how many employees and visitors had entered Social Security Administration offices since the Agency closed its offices; what work was being performed in the offices; and how the Agency was ensuring the safety of employees and visitors in its offices.

If you wish to discuss the final report, please call me or have your staff contact Michelle L. Anderson, Assistant Inspector General for Audit.

cc: Trae Sommer

Attachment

Safety of Employees and Visitors Since March 2020

A-15-21-51103



February 2022

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.

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ABBREVIATIONS

COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
Fed. Reg.	Federal Register
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
SSA	Social Security Administration
VIPr	Visitor Intake Process Re-write

OBJECTIVE

Our objective was 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. The Agency usually serves over 40 million visitors each year in its offices nationwide. On March 13, 2020, the President declared the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak a national emergency. On March 17, 2020, SSA began limiting in-person services in field offices for critical cases and redirected customers to online and telephone service channels in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

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 how SSA is handling the safety of employees and visitors during in-person appointments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Refer to Appendix A for a copy of the requested information.

On June 16, 2021, we published an interim response regarding the safety of employees and visitors during the COVID-19 pandemic.² Between April and June 2021, we invited approximately 1,700 employees in 54 field offices and 7 card centers to participate in a survey regarding the safety of employees and visitors during the pandemic. Of these, 768 employees responded: 639 were non-manager/non-supervisors, and 129 were managers/supervisors.

In May and June 2021, we interviewed 62 managers/supervisors from the 54 field offices and 7 card centers we also surveyed. The subjects of our interview questions included: tracking employees and visitors; office safety measures; personal protective equipment; SSA's treatment of management; response to COVID-19 incidents or exposures; and training. In addition, between May and July 2021, we visited 59 field offices and 6 card centers.³ During our visits, we asked questions about, and observed, the measures SSA was taking to ensure the safety of employees and visitors coming into SSA field offices and card centers. Refer to Appendix B for our scope and methodology.

¹ For example, according to SSA, 2,914 and 4,715 employees were authorized to go into field offices during the weeks ended April 30 and November 12, 2021, respectively.

² SSA, OIG, *Safety of Social Security Administration Employees and Visitors Since March 2020, Congressional Response Report*, A-15-20-51001 (June 2021).

³ We also included 4 of the 59 field offices and the 6 card centers in our survey.

RESULTS OF REVIEW

Employee and Visitor Counts

SSA Headquarters staff provided us visitor and employee in-office count information for March 2020 through April 2021; see Table 1 for a summary. This information was manually provided by office management through the COVID-19 Daily Report; therefore, it was prone to human error. SSA's Office of Operations compiled these data and Audit Liaison provided them to OIG staff through April 30, 2021. We also obtained visitor count information from SSA's Visitor Intake Process Re-write (VIPr) system. To verify the accuracy and completeness of count data, during our interviews and office visits, we asked office management how many employees and visitors were in the office on three OIG-selected dates, per office. We noted numerous inconsistencies between the count information provided by SSA Headquarters staff, VIPr, and office management. SSA acknowledged that each of the three sources of data had limitations that likely affected the accuracy.

Table 1: Number of Employees and Visitors Who Entered SSA's Field Offices⁴

	Employees (March 30, 2020 to April 30, 2021)	Visitors (March 17, 2020 to April 30, 2021)
Daily Average	2,154	1,645
Total	N/A ⁵	483,534
Highest Number in All Offices on a Single Day	3,155	5,050
Highest Number in a Single Office on a Single Day	34	218

As we noted in our interim response,⁶ SSA's ability to support contact tracing is limited because it does not maintain in a central location the names of employees who enter its facilities or the contact information for all visitors. In September 2021, SSA informed us that office managers were not required to retain employee and visitor counts, but they were asked to report the information daily.

⁴ Source: SSA. We were unable to verify the accuracy and completeness of these data.

⁵ SSA did not know the total number of employees who entered its facilities because it separately counts each employee every time. For example, if an employee enters the office Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, the SSA count is three rather than counting that employee only once.

⁶ SSA, OIG, *Safety of Social Security Administration Employees and Visitors Since March 2020, Congressional Response Report, A-15-20-51001*, p.4 (June 2021).

Inaccurate Employee Counts

Effective March 30, 2020, SSA implemented the COVID-19 daily report. SSA asks all field offices and card centers to provide daily information, including the number of employees and visitors and the types of in-person appointments. In addition, some managers use other methods, such as an internal tracking sheet and general work schedules, to track the number of employees who worked onsite each day.

We compared the number of employees reported by office management to counts provided by Headquarters staff. We noted many inaccuracies between the file SSA provided and the counts managers provided. Examples of the reported discrepancies are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Examples of Employee Count Inaccuracies

Office	Date	Office Manager Count ⁷	SSA Headquarters Count ⁸
1	April 9, 2020	0	20
2	October 30, 2020	1	25
3	November 18, 2020	7	22
4	December 7, 2020	24	4
5	April 23, 2021	1	4

Our analysis indicated 173 inconsistencies for 302 sampled dates. Based on this analysis, we were unable to confirm the accuracy of employee counts.

Inaccurate Visitor Counts

Office managers and employees generally used VIPr and the daily COVID-19 report to track the number of visitors who went into their offices. We compared the number of visitors provided via the Daily COVID-19 report inputted by managers to counts reported by office management when we interviewed them. In addition, we compared these amounts to VIPr. We noted many inaccuracies between the three sources. SSA stated,

VIPr data was skewed because as employees adjusted to the remote work environment, they frequently forgot to change the type of interview in VIPr from in-person to telephone, making the VIPr data unreliable. Lastly since OIG asked managers to tell them how many visitors they had on a given day in the past, it is likely that managers used various methods to obtain that information, which may not be reliable. Over the course of the pandemic, SSA has made changes to improve the accuracy of the data being reported, including issuing clarifying guidance for VIPr inputs and modifying the daily survey questions.

⁷ We obtained the data from responses provided during the interviews and site visits with office managers.

⁸ Office management manually provided the number of employees and visitors who physically went into offices through the COVID-19 Daily Report. SSA's Office of Operations compiled these data and Audit Liaison provided them to OIG staff through April 30, 2021.

Examples of the reported discrepancies are shown in the Table 3.

Table 3: Examples of Visitor Count Inaccuracies

Office	Date	Office Manager Count ⁹	SSA Headquarters Count ¹⁰	VIPr Count
1	April 3, 2020	0	0	183
2	June 30, 2020	30	30	16
3	September 18, 2020	15	39	23
4	November 12, 2020	0	11	0
5	March 29, 2021	27	44	27

Our analysis indicated 85 inconsistencies for 303 sampled dates between the office manager count and SSA Headquarters counts. Based on this analysis, we were unable to confirm the accuracy of visitor count information.

SSA defines a visitor as “the individual requesting services” and counts “the individual needing to conduct business” with the Agency.¹¹ During our interviews with office management, we noted they defined visitors as:

- the person who has the appointment;
- the person who has the appointment, including translators and/or representative payees and people accompanying the applicant;
- everyone;
- the person with the appointment or the person dropping something off—but *not* those who accompany them;
- anyone who goes into the office who does not work there;
- customers entering the office for services, not those using the drop box;¹² and
- anyone conducting business with SSA.

⁹ See Footnote 7.

¹⁰ See Footnote 8.

¹¹ SSA, OIG, *Safety of Social Security Administration Employees and Visitors Since March 2020*, Congressional Response Report, A-15-20-51001, Appendix C-3 (June 2021).

¹² SSA created the “drop box” pilot program to allow the public a new service delivery method that provides limited contact with its employees. The public receives notification to provide original evidence within a certain timeframe and personally delivers it into a secure receptacle in a field office.

SSA policy allows one visitor per appointment and one representative, if needed.¹³ For example, representative payees, caseworkers, or minor children may accompany visitors. During our interviews, office management indicated they had no restrictions on who could accompany visitors, but they asked visitors to come alone to their appointments unless they needed a translator/interpreter or physical assistance. Office management indicated they did not usually track contact information for individuals who accompanied visitors.

Approximately half of the locations we visited did not have visitors during our visit. The maximum number of visitors we observed, in any office was 21, and some visitors were accompanied by either minor children or translators.

In July 2021, SSA found inconsistencies in how managers reported employee and visitor count information. SSA made changes to improve the accuracy of daily reporting, including:

- clarifying the wording of some questions and related instructions;
- eliminating extension of the prior day's response on items that would likely change from day to day; and
- requesting that regional offices stress the importance of ensuring office managers report information accurately.

We did not evaluate the accuracy of the daily reporting counts after SSA made these changes in July 2021.

Providing training and/or several examples on whom SSA considers a visitor and how to track the number of visitors and employees coming into the office may help SSA management determine an accurate number of visitors and employees coming into its offices.

In-office Workloads and Services to the Public

Since March 2020, a limited number of authorized employees, mostly managers who are not members of a bargaining unit,¹⁴ have entered field offices to perform mission-critical work that cannot be done remotely (referred to as non-portable work). This includes opening mail, sending documents that require SSA's action to remote workers, and returning documents to the public. Employees must also report to field offices to address administrative tasks that cannot be handled remotely, including renewing employee credentials or resolving information technology issues.

¹³ SSA, *Reposting Plan*, p. 3 (August 2020).

¹⁴ Bargaining unit employees are covered by a labor union. Generally, management positions are not covered by a union and are considered non-bargaining unit employees.

Employees also provide limited in-person services to the public by appointment only. According to SSA, during these in-person appointments, employees process:

- ✓ requests for Social Security number cards if the applicants (a) are age 12 or older and applying for a card for the first time or (b) need to update or correct information (such as name, date of birth, or citizenship) to obtain income, resources, medical care or coverage, or other services or benefits;
- ✓ immediate payments to beneficiaries/recipients who allege they are without food and cannot obtain it, lack medicine or medical care and cannot obtain it, or lack shelter;
- ✓ death correction cases that require face-to-face interviews; and
- ✓ primary identification documents SSA needs to adjudicate retroactive benefits.

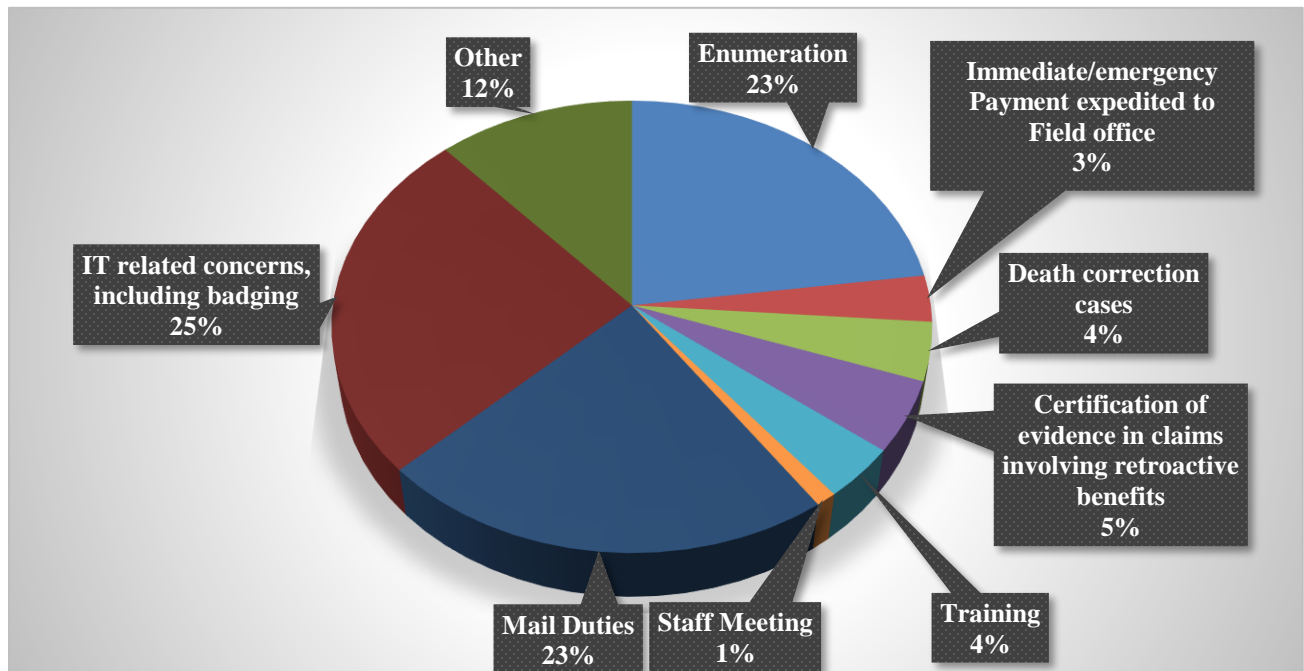
Some office management told us the maximum number of in-office visitor appointments scheduled per day depended on the office's days/hours of operation, number of employees in the office, need/demand for the appointment, scheduling limitations, and resource availability. The number of visitor appointments per day in an office, according to office management we interviewed, ranged from 2 in field offices to 140 in card centers.

Effective May 28, 2021, SSA expanded nation-wide implementation of express interviews in all field offices and card centers.¹⁵ During express interviews, Agency staff pre-screens customers over the telephone to confirm they need a face-to-face visit to ensure the time customer spends in the office is brief (approximately 5 to 7 minutes).

Of our survey respondents, 534 employees physically went into an SSA office. The majority believed management provided sufficient time before going back into the office and believed it was necessary to go into the office to perform certain workloads. Those workloads, by frequency, are shown in Figure 1.

¹⁵ SSA, EM-21041 (May 27, 2021). To qualify for an express interview, individuals must meet existing limited, critical appointment criteria and be unable to use SSA's automated services. Individuals also qualify for an express interview if they are unable or unwilling to mail original evidence documents.

Figure 1: In-office Workloads¹⁶



Our interviews with office management and office visits revealed that, from March 17, 2020 to July 28, 2021, office managers, who are non-bargaining-unit employees, were going into offices to complete non-portable work. SSA provided office managers guidance on the number of bargaining-unit employees who may voluntarily report to offices to assist with the non-portable workloads throughout the pandemic. The majority of work performed during our visits was opening, scanning, assigning to mail to employees and returning original documents to applicants. During our visits, some office management stated they did not have adequate in-person staffing to keep up with mail duties while offices remained closed. Office management noted, in most cases, once additional staff were allowed in the office, the mail process improved.

¹⁶ Other workloads included managerial duties, administrative duties, check remittance, drop box, moving offices, and other facility related matters.

Safety Measures, Personal Protective Supplies, and Cleaning

On March 4, 2021, SSA published the COVID-19 Workplace Safety Plan¹⁷ to align with the Office of Management and Budget guidance on Agency Model Safety Principles.¹⁸ The Workplace Safety Plan outlines the measures SSA will take to ensure the health and safety of employees and visitors as well as SSA's workplace operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. SSA plans to begin staff re-entry on March 30, 2022 and will continue operating under its COVID-19 Workplace Safety Plan.

A majority of our survey respondents indicated they could raise safety concerns to management, and SSA effectively communicated overall operational status to employees. The majority of respondents indicated:

- SSA had taken appropriate measures to address health and safety concerns for employees;
- employees could raise any in-office health and safety concerns to management or other designated contacts; and
- SSA effectively communicated facility closures and overall operational status, specific to COVID-19.

We asked the 534 respondents, who indicated they went into the office, questions regarding the COVID-19 safety measures within their offices. Of those, 389 indicated their offices had COVID-19 signage, such as floor markings (6 feet apart for social distancing), face mask requirements, and the office telephone number for questions and to schedule appointments.¹⁹

In addition to signage, a majority of respondents indicated their offices took safety measures to protect employees and visitors, including:

- providing a supply of face masks for employee and visitor use;
- promoting social distancing between employees and visitors (minimum of 6 feet apart);
- conducting interviews behind protective barriers, such as plexiglass;
- holding meetings outdoors; and
- providing personal protective equipment, such as gloves, hand sanitizer, and other disinfecting products.

¹⁷ SSA, *COVID-19 Workplace Safety Plan*, (March 2021).

¹⁸ OMB, *COVID-19 Safe Federal Workplace: Agency Model Safety Principles*, M-21-15, (2021).

¹⁹ SSA provided signage to post in office in the COVID-19 Reposturing Plan. This included in-person service by appointment-only reminders, hand-washing reminders, social-distance reminders, and ways to protect oneself from COVID-19.

We also asked questions in our survey regarding in-office cleaning measures. Half of the respondents to Question 22 in our survey indicated the following types of cleaning protocols were being followed in the office:

- when visitors left, the areas they were in were disinfected immediately;
- areas were regularly cleaned throughout the workday but not every time a visitor left;
- the entire office was cleaned at the end of the day but not during the workday; and
- standard cleaning was performed one to three times per week.

During our interviews, most management stated employees were required to self-screen for symptoms before they went into offices. The President's Executive Order, effective January 20, 2021, requires that all Federal employees wear masks, consistent with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, and maintain physical distance while in Federal spaces.²⁰ During our office visits, we noted most employees wore their masks properly and maintained social distance. However, we noted some employees did not comply with mask-wearing guidelines. In three offices, employees were either not wearing masks at all or were not fully covering their noses and mouths. In one of these offices, an employee did not wear a mask because they had been vaccinated.

Procedures for Potential COVID-19 Exposures

Our survey also asked employees whether they had been exposed to COVID-19 either within, or outside, their offices. A majority of respondents indicated SSA told them to stay home if they lived with or came in close contact with others who had tested positive for COVID-19 or were suspected of having COVID-19. Of our survey respondents, 215 indicated they had to quarantine because they were exposed to COVID-19 outside of SSA facilities. In addition, 66 indicated SSA notified them of potential in-office exposures to COVID-19: 54 indicated SSA notified them in an appropriate and timely manner, and 22 needed to quarantine because of the potential exposures.

During our interviews and office visits, office management stated 31 offices closed because of COVID-19 exposures. SSA Headquarters provided us a list of offices that closed because of exposures. We compared this list to the information office management provided and found 15 discrepancies. In one instance, Headquarters staff indicated an office closed because of an exposure; however, a manager in that office stated there was never a time during the pandemic the office closed because of a COVID-19 exposure.²¹

²⁰ *Protecting the Federal Workforce and Requiring Mask-Wearing*, Executive Order No. 13991, 86 Fed. Reg. 7045 (January 25, 2021).

²¹ Office management manually provided the COVID-19 exposures through the COVID-19 Daily Report. SSA's Office of Operations compiled these data and provided them to OIG staff through April 30, 2021.

Agency-provided Training and Guidance

We asked survey respondents whether SSA provided training and/or guidance regarding COVID-19 policies and procedures. The majority of respondents stated they received information from SSA management on how to mitigate the risk of staff and visitors contracting COVID-19. SSA also provided training on proper mask and glove use as well as cleaning and disinfecting.²² As more individuals come back into offices and interact with the public, SSA should continue training employees and visitors on mitigating the risk of COVID-19 exposures. SSA should encourage all employees to complete available COVID-19 safety-related training.

Other Observations

During our interviews with management and our office visits, we learned office managers—who are not members of a bargaining unit—were the main staff reporting to the offices throughout the pandemic. Approximately half of the office management we interviewed believed they were treated fairly; while the remaining office managers indicated SSA leadership could have provided them more support during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sixteen members of management stated they felt overworked, dispensable, and unappreciated, and 45 said the Agency did not realize the large volume of non-portable work for which they were responsible. Management noted it was a challenge to juggle their normal managerial duties and the non-portable workload. Management stated they would like clarification on what SSA leadership expects of them in terms of managing non-portable workloads and their normal managerial duties, as well as more support for handling the volume of non-portable work. Per SSA, “since OIG’s site visits, SSA put timeliness metrics in place for processing mail backlogs and to maintain mail currency. In addition, SSA leadership continues to communicate to managers and employees that the current Workplace Safety Plan allows us to operate with up to 25 percent of normal occupancy to handle in-person interviews and assist with other non-portable workloads, such as mail.” Seventeen members of office management felt the health and safety of bargaining unit employees was more important to Agency leadership than management’s health and safety because it is primarily managers who have to be on-site.

We asked SSA why managers have been required to come into offices during the pandemic. SSA responded,

To protect the health and safety of our employees and visitors, we limited onsite personnel and maximized telework. Since some workloads must take place onsite, managers need to be onsite as well to oversee that work, and conduct inherently management onsite functions, such as addressing facility issues, ensuring the security of the office and employees, and maintaining office equipment. In addition, managers can assist with other work like conducting interviews for critical services, handling mail, and scanning paper documents into our systems to enable remote workers to complete work. It is important to note that managers were not required to conduct onsite work if they had COVID-19-related circumstances, such as high-risk medical conditions, or lack of childcare. As the volume of onsite work and backlogs increased, we have increased

²² SSA assigned the training, *How to Safely Wear and Remove a Cloth Face Covering*, to all employees that should be completed before reporting onsite.

the number of managers and employees who are working in the office. The majority of onsite staff are volunteers; however, we have directed employees to return to the office as needed. We monitor onsite staffing at the area and regional levels to ensure we comply with our Workplace Safety Plan.

Conclusions

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.

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Michelle L. Anderson
Assistant Inspector General for Audit

APPENDICES

Appendix A – LETTER FROM SUBCOMMITTEE

JOHN B. LARSON
CONNECTICUT,
CHAIRMAN

BILL PASCRELL JR., NEW JERSEY
LINDA T. SANCHEZ, CALIFORNIA
DAN KILDEE, MICHIGAN
BRENDAN BOYLE, PENNSYLVANIA
BRAD SCHNEIDER, ILLINOIS
BRIAN HIGGINS, NEW YORK

KATHRYN OLSON,
STAFF DIRECTOR

Congress of the United States
U.S. House of Representatives

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TOM REED
NEW YORK,
RANKING MEMBER

JOEY ARRINGTON, TEXAS
DREW FERGUSON, GEORGIA
RON ESTES, KANSAS

AMY SHUART,
STAFF DIRECTOR

August 7, 2020

Gail S. Ennis
Inspector General
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21207

Dear Inspector General Ennis:

To ensure the safety of Social Security Administration (SSA) employees as well as the individuals they serve, the Commissioner of Social Security closed field offices to most employees and the public on Tuesday, March 17, 2020. Since this closure, the agency has primarily continued to support service delivery and real-time to meet its mission by phone and online. When service cannot be performed by phone or online, SSA provides in-person service by appointment only for limited, dire need situations. We are aware that SSA recently issued guidance, *COVID-19 UPDATE: Safety Protocols and FAQs*, related to employee and visitor safety issues. To gain a better understanding of how SSA is handling the safety of employees and visitors during in-person appointments, we request that your office:

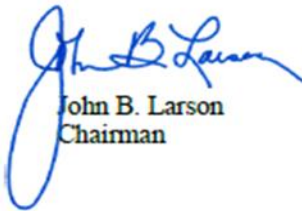
1. Determine how many SSA employees have continued to work in agency facilities conducting in-person appointments since the agency closed field offices.
 - a. Determine what types of duties these employees are performing during these in-person appointments.
 - b. Determine where these in-person appointments are being held.
2. Determine how many visitors SSA has already assisted in-person since it closed field offices.
 - a. Determine what types of in-person services visitors are requesting.
 - b. Determine what types of in-person services SSA has provided to visitors.
3. Determine what personal protective equipment, cleaning supplies, and other safety measures have been required for employees and visitors in SSA facilities since it closed field offices.

Letter to Inspector General Ennis
August 7, 2020
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4. Provide any observations you may have regarding the agency's employee and visitor safety efforts to date.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this request. Should you or your staff have any questions, please contact Kathryn Olson, the Social Security Subcommittee Majority Staff Director, at kathryn.olson@mail.house.gov, and Amy Shuart, the Social Security Subcommittee Republican Staff Director, at amy.shuart@mail.house.gov.

Sincerely,



John B. Larson
Chairman



Tom Reed
Republican Leader

Appendix B – SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

To accomplish our objective, we:

- reviewed Social Security Administration’s (SSA) Reposturing Plan,¹ COVID-19 Workplace Safety Plan;²
- reviewed the White House’s Guidelines for Opening Up America Again³ and Executive Order, Protecting the Federal Workforce and Requiring Mask-Wearing;⁴
- reviewed applicable criteria from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Environmental Protection Agency, and Department of Labor;
- reviewed Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance, including, Aligning Federal Agency Operations with the National Guidelines for Opening Up America Again,⁵ COVID-19 Safe Federal Workplace: Agency Model Safety Principles,⁶ and Integrating Planning for A Safe Increased Return of Federal Employees and Contractors to Physical Workplaces with Post-Reentry Personnel Policies and Work Environment;⁷
- reviewed applicable Federal laws and regulations and SSA’s policies and procedures;
- invited approximately 1,700 employees from 54 field offices and 7 card centers to participate in our anonymous survey. We selected 5 offices in each of SSA’s 10 regions – 2 offices that had the largest number of employees going into the office for the period March 30, 2020 through December 1, 2020, and 3 offices were randomly selected using a random number generator. One card center was included in our original selection of 55 offices. We also selected 5 offices with a known closure because of a COVID-19 exposure;
- interviewed 62 members of management⁸ from the 54 field offices and 7 Social Security card centers (using the same sample of offices for the survey);
- visited 59 field offices and 6 card centers; and
- reviewed the employee and visitor count information provided by SSA Headquarters staff for the period March 2020 through April 2021.

¹ SSA, *Reposturing Plan*, (August 2020).

² SSA, *COVID-19 Workplace Safety Plan*, (March 2021).

³ White House, *Opening Up America Again*, whitehouse.gov (last visited August 20, 2020).

⁴ *Protecting the Federal Workforce and Requiring Mask-Wearing*, Executive Order No. 13991, 86 Fed. Reg. 7045 (January 25, 2021).

⁵ OMB, *Aligning Federal Agency Operations with the National Guidelines for Opening Up America Again*, M-20-23, (2020).

⁶ OMB, *COVID-19 Safe Federal Workplace: Agency Model Safety Principles*, M-21-15, (2021).

⁷ OMB, *Integrating Planning for A Safe Increased Return of Federal Employees and Contractor to Physical Workplaces with Post-Reentry Personnel Policies and Work Environment*, M-21-25, (2021).

⁸ We held two separate interviews for one office due change in management personnel during our audit period.

The principal entity audited was the Office of Operations. We conducted our audit from August 2020 through August 2021, including surveys, interviews and site visits to offices throughout the continental United States. We selected the majority of the offices based on the proximity to Office of the Inspector General volunteer's residence, services provided at the office, and the size of the field office. We conducted all visits during regular business hours with no days of the week excluded, and 19 of our visits were unannounced. Our field office and card center visits included audit procedures for our Interim Report.⁹

We assessed the reliability of the employee and visitor data provided by SSA. We determined the computerized data for employee and visitor counts were not sufficiently reliable given the audits objective and intended use of the data. Please see the Employee and Visitor Counts section of this report for further discussion regarding the reliability of the data.

We assessed the significance of internal controls necessary to satisfy the audit objectives. This included an assessment of the five internal controls 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 components and principles as significant to the audit objective.

- Component 1: Control Environment
 - Principle 2: Exercise oversight responsibility
 - Principle 3: Establish structure, responsibility, and authority
- Component 2: Risk Assessment
 - Principle 7: Identify, analyze, and respond to risk
 - Principle 9: Analyze and respond to change
- Component 4: Information and Communications
 - Principle 13: Use of quality information
 - Principle 14: Communicate internally
 - Principle 15: Communicate externally
- Component 5: Monitoring
 - Principle 16: Perform monitoring activities

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

⁹ SSA, OIG, *Safety of Social Security Administration's Processing of Mail and Enumeration Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Interim Report, A-08-21-51036 and A-15-21-51015*, (July 2021).

Appendix C – SURVEY RESULTS

Between April and June 2021, we invited approximately 1,700 Social Security Administration (SSA) employees in 54 field offices and 7 card centers to participate in a survey regarding the safety of employees and visitors that have physically come into the offices since October 1, 2020. Of those invited, 768 responded. See Table 1 for the survey results.

Table 1: Survey Results

Question 1: What is your job at SSA? [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Manager/Supervisor	129
Non-manager/non-supervisor	639
Question 2: Did you receive information from your regional management and/or headquarters on how to mitigate the COVID-19 risk to staff and visitors? [Choose one option] ¹	Number of Respondents
Yes	128
No	1
Question 3: Did you receive information from your manager/supervisor on how to lower the COVID-19 exposure risk to staff and visitors? [Choose one option] ^{2 3}	Number of Respondents
Yes	566
No	74
Question 4: Have you physically gone into an SSA office since October 1, 2020? [Choose one option] ⁴	Number of Respondents
Yes	534
No	234

¹ This question was only presented to managers and supervisors.

² This question was only presented to non-managers/non-supervisors.

³ Our number of respondents for Question 3 is one respondent more because a manager/supervisor was incorrectly sent to Questions 2 and 3 in the survey tool.

⁴ Participants that answered “Yes” were presented Questions 5 through 23. Participants who answered “No” skipped to Question 24.

Question 5: Why did you go into the office? [Select all that apply]	Number of Respondents
Enumeration/Application for a Social Security Card ⁵	241
Immediate/emergency Payment expedited to Field Office	35
Death correction cases	44
Certification of evidence in claims involving retroactive benefits	54
Training	40
Staff Meeting	11
Mail Duties	239
IT Related concerns, including badging, Personal Identity Verifications cards, and laptops ⁶	268
Other: Free Response	123
Other responses include: Non-portable workloads, medical continuing disability reviews, Orientations/New employee duties, paystubs, office move, check remittance, drop box cash, writing checks, meet contractors, security reviews, managerial duties, administrative duties, detail, facility related matters, loss of power/no access to virtual private network, pick up personal items and a general statement.	
Question 6: I needed to go into the office to accomplish the task(s) described in the previous question. [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Agree	498
Disagree	36
Question 7: Did you volunteer to go into the office to accomplish the task(s) described in Question 5 or did management request you to go into the office to accomplish the task(s)? [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
I volunteered to go into the office to accomplish the task(s)	247
Management directed me to into the office to accomplish the task(s)	162
I have both volunteered to go into the office and have been directed by management to go into the office to accomplish the task(s)	125
Question 8: Did you go into the office at least once weekly? [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Yes	255
No	279

⁵ Application for a Social Security Card was added to the second survey sent to card centers to avoid duplication in the free response section.

⁶ We added PIV cards and laptops to the second survey sent to card centers to avoid duplication in the free response section.

Question 9: On average, since October 1, 2020, how often did/do you go into the office per week? [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
1 day	65
2 days	42
3 days	71
4 days	24
5 days	54
Question 10: If less than weekly, on average, how often did/do you go into the office? [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Once a month	21
Twice a month	27
Other: Free Response	230
Other responses include: One to ten times total, weekly, all days offices were open, on rotation, sporadically with varying frequency, only for Saturday overtime, only when necessary, 3 times a week every other week and never or not applicable.	
Question 11: How much advance notice did you get before having to go to an SSA field office? [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
2 weeks or more	203
1 week	148
2 days	38
1 day	57
Other: Free Response	90
Other responses include: Did not go into the office, no notice, at the discretion of the manager or when needed, varies, not specified, 3 days and a few hours.	
Question 12: How was the advance notice provided? [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Letter in the mail	0
Email	224
Telephone	180
Other: Free Response	130
Other responses include: Through a schedule, phone, skype/instant message, verbally/staff meeting, letter, multiple methods, never stopped going into the office, no advance notice given, volunteered-no notice, management-no notice and a general statement.	
Question 13: I was given sufficient notice before having to report to an SSA office. [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Agree	505
Disagree	29

Question 14: Were signs about COVID-19 safety measures put up in the SSA office? For example, marks on the floors every 6 feet for social distancing, ways to protect yourself and others, or appointment only reminders? [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Yes	389
No	57
Do not know	88
Question 15: Please indicate what types of signs were put up in the office? [Select all that apply]	Number of Respondents
Floor Markings (6 feet apart for social distancing)	133
Ways to protect yourself	328
Face mask requirements	375
Appointment only reminders	246
Self-screening reminders	289
Other: Free Response	14
Other responses include: Unavailable workstations and seating signs, poster with unspecific content, sign on door, table signs to encourage social distancing, construction-no markings, protections at the windows, Plexiglas barrier, floor markings not used due to lack of space, does not know.	
Question 16: What safety measures have been put in place for face-to-face meetings with visitors? [Select all that apply]	Number of Respondents
Face masks for both employee and visitor	391
Social distancing between employee and visitor (minimum of 6 feet apart)	318
Meeting outdoors	49
Interviews behind protective barriers, such as Plexiglas	318
No safety measures	3
Do not know	135
Other: Free Response	32
Other responses include: Dire need appointments only, no walk-ins, phone screening/screening before entrance, limited number of people in the office at a time, gloves, hand sanitizer, do not meet with general public, disinfectant spray and wipes, concern about lack of personal protective supplies, mask use not enforced, social distancing not respected, management handling meetings, and unrelated complaint.	
Question 17: When you were in the office, were SSA-provided facemasks available for employees? [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Yes	368
No	36
Do not know	130

Question 18: When you were in the office, did SSA provide the following for employees? [Select all that apply]	Number of Respondents
Gloves	308
Hand Sanitizer	437
Disinfectant sprays	252
Disinfectant wipes	368
Items above were not provided	24
Do not know	75
Question 19: When you were in the office, did any visitors come into the field office/card center? [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Yes	297
No	173
Do not know	64
Question 20: When you were in the office, were SSA-provided facemasks available for visitors? [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Yes	203
No	33
Do not know	298
Question 21: When you were in the office, did SSA provide the following for visitors? [Select all that apply]	Number of Respondents
Gloves	45
Hand sanitizer	212
Disinfectant sprays	48
Disinfectant wipes	63
Do not know	324
Question 22: What cleaning measures are taken when a visitor leaves the field office? [Select all that apply]	Number of Respondents
Disinfecting of the area the visitor was in, immediately upon leaving	106
Regular cleaning throughout the work day, but not every time a visitor leaves	85
Standard cleaning of the entire office at the end of the day, but nothing during the workday	113
Do not know	294
Other: Free Response	25
Other responses include: Only contractors visited and they provided their own masks, wiped down surfaces when possible, no visitors, only meetings held were with management, meetings conducted outside, expressed concerns about the frequency as well as thoroughness of the cleaning, cleaning is done once to three times per week, no cleaning done and not specified although they do a list of cleaning procedures.	

Question 23: If your office had a known COVID-19 exposure, were additional cleaning measures taken in your office, such as additional sanitizing? [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Yes	110
No	13
To my knowledge, my office has not had a known COVID-19 exposure	250
Do not know	161
Question 24: SSA has taken appropriate measures to address health and safety concerns for employees. [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Agree	670
Disagree	98
Question 25: SSA has taken appropriate measures to address health and safety concerns for visitors. [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Agree	662
Disagree	106
Question 26: Have you reported to SSA that you, someone you live with, or someone you have come in close contact with, is suspected to have or tested positive for COVID-19? [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Yes	216
No	552
Question 27: Has SSA told you to stay home if you, someone you live with, or someone you have come in close contact with, is suspected to have or tested positive for COVID-19? [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Yes	609
No	159
Question 28: Has SSA notified you that you were potentially exposed to COVID-19? [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Yes	66
No	702
Question 29: You were notified in an appropriate and timely manner of a potential exposure to COVID-19. [Choose one option] ⁷	Number of Respondents
Agree	54
Disagree	12

⁷ The survey presented this question only to those that answered "Yes" to Question 28.

Question 30: Have you had to quarantine due to a COVID-19 exposure at an SSA facility? ⁸ [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Yes	22
No	44
Question 31: Have you had to quarantine due to a COVID-19 exposure somewhere other than an SSA facility? [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Yes	215
No	553
Question 32: Have you completed the following trainings? [Select all that apply]	Number of Respondents
Wearing and Removing Face Coverings	616
How to Properly Remove Disposable Gloves	456
Cleaning and Disinfection Awareness	475
I did not complete any of these trainings	131
Question 33: Did SSA inform you of your rights to a safe and healthful work environment, whom to contact with questions or concerns, and prohibitions against retaliation for raising such questions and concerns? [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Yes	547
No	221
Question 34: If you have health and safety concerns in the office (for employees and/or visitors), are you able to raise these issues to management or designated contacts? [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Yes	700
No	68
Question 35: How effective is SSA in communicating facility closures and overall operational status, specific to COVID-19? [Choose one option]	Number of Respondents
Effective	619
Ineffective	149
Question 36: Please provide additional comments if you believe SSA should take additional steps to protect employees and visitors during the COVID-19 pandemic. [Free response]	Number of Respondents
Total free responses	254 ⁹

⁸ The survey presented this question only to those that answered “Yes” to Question 28.

⁹ We incorporated applicable free responses into the body of our report, as appropriate.

Question 37: Were you provided guidance by a manager/supervisor on whether or how to respond to this survey? [Choose one option] ¹⁰	Number of Respondents
Yes	179
No	460

¹⁰ This question was presented only to non-managers/non-supervisors.

Appendix D – AGENCY COMMENTS



Social Security

MEMORANDUM

Date: February 10, 2022

Refer To: TQA-1

To: Gail S. Ennis
Inspector General

From: Scott Frey 
Chief of Staff

Subject: Office of the Inspector General Draft Congressional Response Report “Safety of Employees and Visitors Since March 2020” (A-15-21-51103) -- INFORMATION

Thank you for the opportunity to review the draft report. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we limited onsite personnel and maximized telework to protect our employees and the American public. To address workload challenges with processing non-portable work, we increased onsite staff in local offices within the guidelines of our Workplace Safety Plan while maintaining safety measures. We continue to stress the importance of appropriate safety measures within our offices. Over the course of the pandemic, we adjusted our processes to improve the accuracy of the data our managers must manually collect in more than 1200 offices nationwide.

Please let me know if I can be of further assistance. You may direct staff inquiries to

Trae Sommer at (410) 965-9102.



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