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SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Better Planning Needed to Improve Service Delivery

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Education, Workforce, and Income Security

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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-10-586T, a report to Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Social Security

April 15, 2010

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Better Planning Needed to Improve Service Delivery

Why GAO Did This Study

Millions of people rely on the services of Social Security Administration (SSA) field offices. In fiscal year 2009, SSA's approximately 1,300 field offices provided service to a record 45.1 million customers. People visit field offices to apply for Social Security cards, apply for retirement and disability benefits, request replacement benefit checks, and a host of other services. Over the last several years, growing workloads have challenged field offices' ability to manage work while continuing to deliver quality customer service.

The Subcommittee asked GAO to discuss our January 2009 report on SSA field office service delivery challenges. Specifically, this testimony will discuss (1) the state of SSA field office operations, and (2) the status of SSA's efforts to develop a plan to address future service delivery challenges.

To respond to the request, GAO relied primarily on the January 2009 report titled *Social Security Administration: Service Delivery Plan Needed to Address Baby Boom Retirement Challenges* (GAO-09-24, Jan. 2009), and updated it with additional information provided by SSA. In that report, GAO recommended that SSA develop a service delivery plan that explains how it will deliver quality service while managing growing work demands. SSA agreed to develop a document that describes service delivery and staffing plans. No new recommendations are being made in this testimony.

View GAO-10-586T or key components.
For more information, contact Barbara D. Bovbjerg @ (202) 512-7215 or bovbjergb@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Since we last examined service at SSA field offices, SSA has expanded the level of staffing, and encouraged greater use of automated services. However, rapidly rising workloads have adversely affected customer service and the quality of some work, despite SSA's efforts. Recent hiring by SSA nearly restored field offices to their fiscal year 2005 level, but field offices have experienced rapid growth in their retirement and disability claims workloads. SSA used various strategies to manage the growing workload, including deferring some reviews of beneficiaries' continuing eligibility. However, deferring these reviews means that beneficiaries who no longer qualify for benefits may still receive payments erroneously. Key customer service indicators were also affected. In fiscal year 2009, more than 3 million customers waited over 1 hour to be served. Further, SSA's Field Office Caller Survey found that 58 percent of customers calling selected field offices had at least one earlier call that had gone unanswered, but for methodological reasons, the unanswered call rate was likely even higher.

End of Fiscal Year Field Office Staffing and Work Completed, Fiscal Years 2005-2009

Fiscal year	Total number of SSA employees	Number of field office employees	Field office work (in work units)	Work units per employee
2005	65,122	28,790	37.1	1,289
2006	63,054	27,383	37.0	1,350
2007	61,594	26,743	36.2	1,352
2008	63,202	27,534	36.5	1,327
2009	66,459	28,656	37.9	1,322
Percent change, 2005-2009	**2.1%**	**-0.5%**	**2.1%**	**2.6%**

SSA has not yet offered a plan to detail how it will address future service delivery challenges as GAO recommended in January 2009. With projected increases to SSA's workload from retirement and disability filings from the nation's baby boom generation, and a continued wave of retirements of experienced staff, the need for such a plan is greater than ever. SSA estimates about a 14 percent rise in Old-Age and Survivors Insurance, Disability Insurance (Disability), and Supplemental Security Income claims over the next 10 years, rising from a combined total of 9.4 million, in fiscal year 2008 to 10.7 million in fiscal year 2017. In addition, based on SSA's projections, 41 percent of the current workforce will retire by fiscal year 2018. With such challenges, it is critical for SSA to develop a plan to discuss how it will address future challenges. SSA officials did not provide GAO with an update on where the agency stood in developing such a plan.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss the state of Social Security Administration (SSA) field office services. SSA's approximately 1,300 field offices serve a vital role as SSA's primary contact with the public. In 2009, a record 45.1 million people visited field offices to apply for Social Security cards and benefits, and to request replacement benefit checks and a host of other services. In January 2009, we issued a report that discussed field office service challenges.[1] In the time since our report, field office staffing has increased slightly, nearly restoring staffing levels to their fiscal year 2005 level. With the recent economic downturn, field offices are facing more pressure than ever to meet service delivery needs, and soon baby boomer retirements will stretch SSA field office staff even further.

Today I will discuss (1) the current state of SSA field office operations, and (2) the status of SSA's efforts to develop a plan to address future service delivery challenges. This testimony is based on our January 2009 report and updated with additional information provided by SSA. In developing that report, we obtained various automated data on field office staffing, productivity, and customer wait times. We also interviewed SSA headquarters officials responsible for overseeing field office operations, as well as managers and staff in 21 field offices, two Social Security Card Centers, two regional offices, and three area offices. To update this information, we obtained data from SSA, including data on staffing and productivity, and interviewed SSA officials.

We conducted the work for our January 2009 report between July 2007 and January 2009 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards and updated this information in April 2010. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audits to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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[1] GAO, *Social Security Administration: Service Delivery Plan Needed to Address Baby Boom Retirement Challenges* GAO-09-24 (Washington, D.C.: January 2009).

Background

SSA offers a range of services, which includes providing financial assistance to eligible individuals through the following three major benefit programs:

- Old-Age and Survivors Insurance (OASI)—provides benefits to older workers and their families and to survivors of deceased workers.
- Disability Insurance (Disability)—provides benefits to eligible workers who have qualifying disabilities, and their eligible family members.
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI)—provides income for aged, blind, or disabled individuals with limited income and resources.

In fiscal year 2009, these three benefit programs provided a combined total of approximately $704 billion in benefit payments to nearly 59 million beneficiaries. SSA projects that the benefit payments and number of beneficiaries for the three programs will increase in fiscal year 2010.

Besides paying benefits through these three programs, SSA issues Social Security cards, maintains earnings records, and performs various other functions through a network of field office and headquarters operations using an administrative budget of over $10 billion. SSA's field operations consist of:

- field offices, which serve as the agency's primary points for face-to-face contact;
- Social Security Card Centers, which issue original Social Security numbers, and replacement Social Security cards;
- Teleservice Centers, which offer national, toll-free telephone service; and
- Program Service Centers, which make entitlement decisions for benefits, as well as assist in answering 800-number calls.

Field offices are located in communities across the United States, the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and Guam, delivering services through face-to-face contact, over the phone, and through the mail. Field offices range in size from large urban offices with 50 or more employees to very small offices in remote areas called resident stations. SSA currently has 1,259 field offices, 8 Social Security Card Centers, and 29 resident stations. Resident stations have more limited services, and are staffed by one or two individuals. Field offices also offer services to the public through 571 contact stations. These stations provide very limited functions and are staffed with one SSA field office employee who travels once a month to certain locations, such as a hospital, to provide service to customers who lack transportation or telephone access. Additionally, SSA has begun using video conferencing to take claims and provide other services to customers in remote locations. Forty-one field offices are currently using video conferencing to provide service to customers and SSA is preparing to roll-out video conferencing to 80 additional offices. SSA also has a separate video service project in the Denver region to help service geographically diverse areas and provide tribal outreach.

In addition to field offices, SSA offers customers a variety of other options for conducting their business. Individuals may call SSA's toll-free helpline to file for benefits or to obtain general information. They also may use the Internet to file for benefits, or visit a Social Security Card Center to request a Social Security card.

While SSA field offices take applications and determine if claimants meet basic, nonmedical eligibility requirements for benefits, state Disability Determination Services (DDS) that are under contract with SSA make medical eligibility determinations for Disability and SSI claims. SSA's Hearing Offices and Appeals Council make decisions on appeals of these determinations. DDSs also conduct continuing disability reviews for Disability and SSI beneficiaries to ensure that individuals are still medically eligible for payments. For beneficiaries found eligible for disability benefits, SSA periodically conducts disability reviews (CDR) of beneficiaries' earnings and work activity to determine if they are still financially eligible to receive Disability benefits. SSA refers to these reviews as "work CDRs."[2] SSA also conducts periodic reviews to determine if SSI beneficiaries are still eligible to receive SSI payments based on the beneficiary's income, living arrangement, and other non-medical factors related to SSI—these reviews are referred to as SSI redeterminations. One type of redetermination is a limited issue review, which does not require a full review of eligibility.

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[2] SSA also conducts "medical" CDRs. While SSA evaluates non-medical factors to determine a person's continued eligibility for Disability benefits, DDSs evaluate whether a person has medically improved to the point that they are able to work.

Recent Hiring Has Helped Field Offices Manage Growing Claims Workloads, but Work Quality and Customer Service Have Declined

Since we last examined service at SSA field offices, SSA has expanded the level of staffing, and encouraged greater use of automated services. However, rapidly rising workloads have adversely affected customer service and the quality of some work, despite SSA's efforts.

Increases to Field Office Staffing Since Fiscal Year 2008 Has Helped Field Offices to Meet Growing Claims Workloads

Field office staffing stayed about the same from fiscal year 2005 through 2009, despite recent hiring, while the amount of work[3] that field offices produced increased by 2.1 percent (see table 1). As a result of greater efficiency, the average amount of work produced by field office employees increased by 2.6 percent from fiscal year 2005 to 2009. In fiscal years 2008 and 2009, SSA hired a combined number of 4,931 staff for field offices, which helped to almost restore field offices to their fiscal year 2005 staffing level. The additional staffing helped to nearly erase field office staffing reductions in fiscal years 2006 and 2007. In our January 2009 report, we reported that field office staffing declined by 4.4 percent from fiscal years 2005 through 2008, but the amount of work that field offices produced had decreased by only 1.3 percent.

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[3] SSA measures the amount of work produced by multiplying the volume of actions completed by the amount of time required to complete each type of action. The result is what SSA terms "work units." Because some types of actions take longer than others to complete, SSA views work units as a more precise measure than a simple count of the number of actions completed.

Table 1: End of Fiscal Year Field Office Staffing and Work Completed, Fiscal Years 2005-2009

Fiscal year	End of fiscal year total number of SSA employees	Number of field office employees	Field office work (in work units)	Work units completed per employee
2005	65,122	28,790	37.1 million	1,289
2006	63,054	27,383	37.0 million	1,350
2007	61,594	26,743	36.2 million	1,352
2008	63,202	27,534	36.5 million	1,327
2009	66,459	28,656	37.9 million	1,322
Percent change, 2005 - 2008	-2.9%	-4.4%	-1.3%	3.0%
Percent change, 2005 - 2009	2.1%	-0.5%	2.1%	2.6%

Source: GAO analysis of SSA data.

Increases in SSA's fiscal year 2008 and 2009 budget appropriations and American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) funding enabled SSA to provide more staffing resources to field offices. Table 2 shows SSA's final appropriations for fiscal years 2002 through 2009. The table also shows the changes in recent staffing.

Table 2: SSA's Limitation on Administrative Expenses Account and End of Year Total Number of SSA Employees, Fiscal Years 2002-2009

Fiscal year	Final appropriation (in billions)	Total number of SSA employees
2002	$7,570	63,611
2003	7,885	65,191
2004	8,313	64,184
2005	8,733	65,122
2006	9,109	63,054
2007	9,298	61,594
2008	9,745	63,202
2009	11,544	66,459

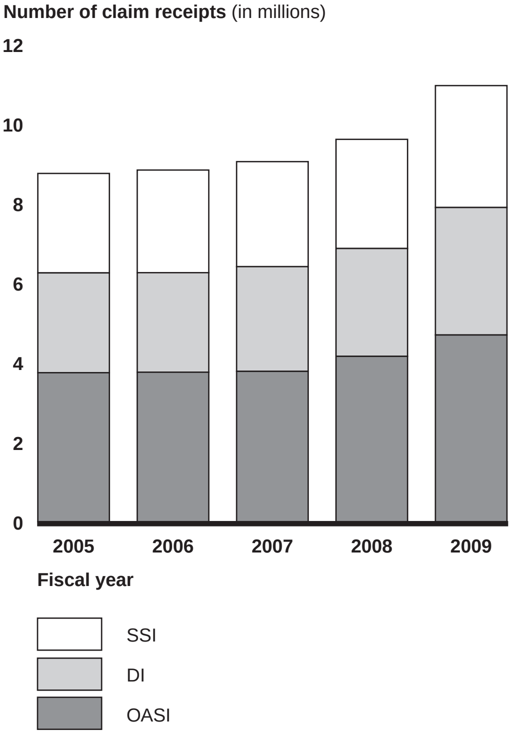
Source: GAO analysis of SSA data.

Note: In fiscal year 2009, SSA received over a billion dollars in ARRA funding. This funding provided SSA $500 million to process retirement and disability workloads, $500 million for a new data center, and $90 million to administer economic recovery payments of $250 per beneficiary.

According to SSA officials, SSA plans to maintain field office staffing levels in fiscal years 2010 and 2011 by providing for a 1:1 replacement rate for staff who leave the agency. SSA is planning to use its fiscal year 2010 and 2011 funding to increase staffing in state DDS offices and SSA hearing offices to reduce disability backlogs; the Commissioner has identified reducing the appeals hearing backlog for disability cases as the agency's top priority.

The demand for field office service and claims workloads has grown to record levels. Comparing fiscal years 2006 and 2009, visitor volume increased by about 3.2 million customers, from 41.9 million to 45.1 million. If the visitor volume during the second half of fiscal year 2010 is the same as the volume during the first half, the volume will again be 45.1 million by the end of the fiscal year. Also, from fiscal year 2005 through 2009, SSA processed a growing number of OASI, Disability, and SSI claims (nonmedical determinations only), which SSA attributes to the onset of the baby boom generation's retirements and the economic downturn (see fig. 1).

Figure 1: Number of OASI, Disability, and SSI Claims Receipts, Fiscal Years 2005-2009



Source: GAO analysis of SSA data.

SSA Has Used Several Different Strategies to Manage Growing Workloads

Even with the increases in field office staffing in fiscal years 2008 and 2009, and some increases in average productivity by employees, many field office managers, responding to a survey conducted in February 2010 by the National Council of Social Security Management Association, Inc. (NCSSMA), [4] stated that staffing levels are inadequate to deal with the growing public service challenges they face daily in field offices. In this survey, over 95 percent of the managers said that they need to hire at least one more employee to provide adequate public service, 89.2 percent said they need at least two more employees, and 71.2 percent said that they need at least three more employees.

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[4] NCSSMA is a membership organization of approximately 3,400 SSA managers and supervisors who provide leadership in field offices and Teleservice Centers throughout the country.

SSA continues to use various strategies to manage work in field offices, such as shifting work among field offices, based on their workloads, encouraging customers to make greater use of automated services, and deferring certain field office work. For example, if an office has work demands that it cannot immediately cover, that office can request that some work be transferred to another office. SSA is also encouraging customers to use automated services. SSA reported that in fiscal years 2008 and 2009, respectively, the public performed 4.0 million and 6.1 million electronic transactions.[5] SSA reported that electronic filings for retirement benefits grew from approximately 407,000 to 833,000 from fiscal year 2008 to 2009, respectively; this represented 18.9 percent and 32.2 percent of the total retirement applications filed in fiscal years 2008 and 2009. As result, SSA is making progress toward achieving the goal it set in its fiscal year 2008 Agency Strategic Plan to achieve an online filing rate of 50 percent of retirement applications by 2012.

With regard to deferring work, SSA has deferred a significant number of SSI redeterminations since fiscal year 2003. Although SSA increased the number of SSI redeterminations in fiscal year 2009 above the 2008 level, the number of reviews remains significantly below the fiscal year 2003 level. Specifically, SSA conducted about 719,000 or 30 percent fewer SSI redeterminations in fiscal year 2009 than it did in fiscal year 2003. However, if SSA completes the number of SSI redeterminations it is projecting for fiscal year 2010, it will be close to the fiscal year 2003 level. Further, the Congress has stated that it is concerned about delays in processing work-related CDRs. Our data show that SSA increased work-related CDRs from about 106,500 in fiscal year 2003 to about 175,600 in fiscal year 2006. However, the number of work CDRs has decreased slightly since 2006, and SSA projects that it will conduct about 174,200 work CDRs in fiscal year 2010 (see fig. 2).

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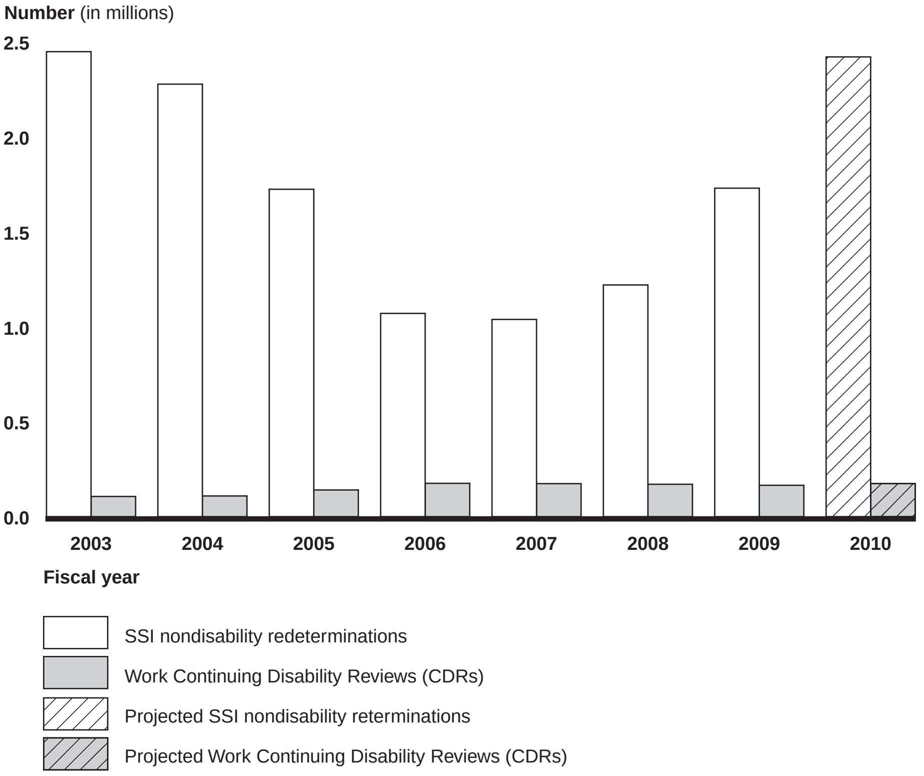
[5] Our January 2009 report (GAO-09-24) stated that SSA reported 3.7 million electronic transactions. However, SSA updated the figure to 4.0 million based on more recent data.

Figure 2: Number of SSI Redeterminations and Work CDRs Completed, Fiscal Years 2003-2009 (Actual) and Fiscal Year 2010 (Projected)



Source: GAO analysis of SSA data.

Note: The numbers for SSI redeterminations include limited issues reviews.

Reviews of continuing eligibility are key activities in ensuring that benefits are paid only to those individuals entitled to them. A fiscal year 2008 Supplemental Security Income Stewardship Report showed the correlation between the number of SSI redeterminations conducted and the overpayment accuracy rate. The data showed that as the number of SSI redeterminations and limited issue reviews decreased, the overpayment accuracy rate[6] for SSI payments declined from 93.6 percent in fiscal year 2005 to 89.7 percent in fiscal year 2008, the lowest level in over 30 years. The report stated that the primary reason for overpayment inaccuracies is failure of SSI recipients and their representative payees to report changes that affect payment, such as changes in income and resources. SSA estimates that CDRs yield a lifetime savings of about $10 for every dollar invested, while SSI redeterminations save $8 over 10 years for every dollar invested.

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[6] The overpayment accuracy rate is the percentage of dollars paid that are free of overpayment errors. The accuracy rate was derived using data from the review of SSI cases with a payment made in at least one month of the fiscal year under review.

Pressures to Meet Increased Workload Demands May Have Contributed to Adverse Effects on Field Office Operations

Pressures on field office staff to meet increased workload demands may have adversely affected the quality of some work. According to the 2010 NCSSMA report, 87.4 percent of survey respondents reported that they receive complaints weekly from the public about the accuracy or timeliness of the work being produced, and 82.5 percent reported that the number of quality case reviews performed in their office is insufficient to ensure an accurate and timely work product. Also, although the percentage of customers rating SSA service favorably (excellent, very good, or good) has remained stable at 81 percent since fiscal year 2007, the rating has declined from its fiscal year 2005 level of 85 percent, and continues to fall short of the agency's 83 percent goal.

Pressures on field office staff may have also contributed to a further decline in customers' satisfaction with field office service than in previous years. According to SSA's fiscal year 2008/2009 field office caller survey, 58 percent of callers got a busy signal or a recording that lines were busy when they called field offices—up from 45 percent in fiscal year 2007, and 55 percent in fiscal year 2008. Because SSA based its results only on customers who were ultimately able to get through to the field offices, the actual percentage of customers that had unanswered calls was likely higher. The decline in field office phone service is further evidenced by results of the 2010 NCSSMA report—64.6 percent of managers said that they were able to provide prompt telephone service less than half the time; virtually all of the managers (98.1 percent) reported that they receive weekly complaints about telephone service provided by their office; and another 67.8 percent of survey respondents said that the increased volume of visitors coming into their office is due in moderate or large part to the inability of their office to provide prompt telephone service. SSA has undertaken efforts to improve telephone service in field offices. SSA initiated a pilot program in 2007 called "Forward on Busy" in 25 field offices to address deficiencies with phone service. SSA has since converted the pilot into a regular program, and 147 offices are participating. Under the program, calls receiving a busy signal at field offices are automatically forwarded to a Teleservice Center. In another effort to improve its telephone service, SSA awarded a $300 million contract to build a Voice over Internet Protocol telephone system for field operations. This system will allow SSA to fully integrate its telephone system and data network, which will provide for faster call routing to any geographic location, and quicker access to caller information.

While SSA made some improvements in customer waiting times in fiscal year 2009, SSA data show that the number of customers waiting for over 2 hours remained about the same. Compared to fiscal year 2008 waiting times, SSA increased the number of customers who waited from 0-60 minutes from 92.1 percent to 92.5 percent; decreased the number of customers who waited for 61-120 minutes from 6.8 percent to 6.6 percent; and remained about the same (1 percent) for customers who waited for more than 2 hours (see table 3).

Table 3: Fiscal Year 2008 and 2009 Waiting Times

Waiting times (in minutes)	Number of customers in Fiscal Year 2008	Percentage of total	Number of customers in Fiscal Year 2009	Percentage of total
0 to 60	38,081,208	92.1%	38,516,903	92.5%
61 to 120	2,826,377	6.8	2,730,323	6.6
More than 120	435,301	1.1	400,630	1.0

Source: SSA data.

Note: The waiting time data for fiscal year 2008 differs from that presented in our January 2009 report because SSA updated the wait time data for an additional 3 million customers.

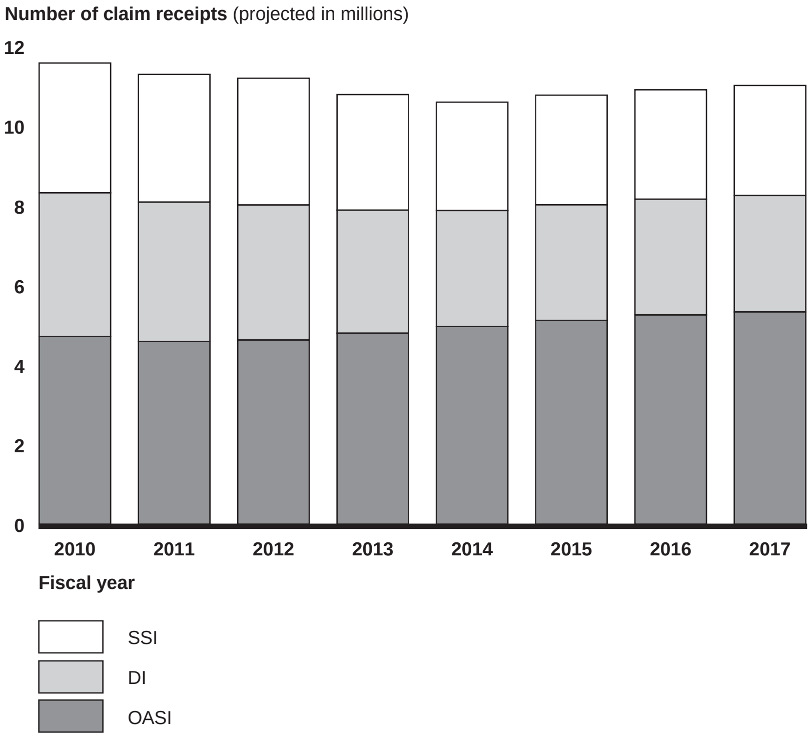
In our January 2009 report, we recommended that SSA establish standards for field office customer waiting times and phone service to help identify and improve offices with poor service. SSA did not act on this recommendation stating that it would create problems by diverting staff already spread thin across field offices.

SSA Has Not Developed a Plan to Describe How It will Address Future Service Delivery Challenges

SSA has not yet offered a plan to detail how it will continue to do more work with fewer resources and achieve its strategic goals. In our 2009 report and prior reports, we recommended that SSA develop a service delivery plan to outline how it would deliver quality service while managing growing work demands and limited resources. SSA partially agreed with our recommendation, stating that it had a number of documents, including its strategic plan, which discusses how it will meet future service delivery needs. However, because of a continuing concern about the agency's lack of a consolidated plan to address service and staffing, SSA agreed to develop a single document to describe its plan for addressing future service delivery challenges. SSA officials did not provide us with an update on where the agency stood in developing this plan.

With projected increases to SSA's workload from retirement and disability filings from the nation's baby boom generation, and a continued wave of retirements of experienced staff, the need for such a plan is greater than ever. For fiscal years 2010 through 2017, SSA projects that the agency will consistently have workloads of approximately 11 million claims (see fig. 3), which is significantly higher than the workloads processed during fiscal years 2005 through 2008, as previously noted in figure 1.

Figure 3: Projected OASI, Disability, and SSI Claims, Fiscal Years 2010-2017



Source: GAO analysis of SSA data.

As we stated in our January 2009 report, it will be more difficult for SSA to meet higher workload challenges as a result of the anticipated retirement of many of the agency's most experienced field office workers. Based on SSA's projections, 22 percent of SSA's current workforce will retire by fiscal year 2013, and the figure will grow to 41 percent by fiscal year 2018. SSA's projections show that a significant portion of the losses will come from supervisory staff, who are among the agency's most experienced staff. For example, SSA projects that 38 percent of supervisory staff are eligible to retire now, 54 percent will be eligible in five years, and 66 percent will be eligible in 10 years. It will take years for SSA to rebuild the decades of knowledge that will be lost from these retirements. Field office managers and staff we spoke to told us that it typically takes 2 to 3 years for new employees to become fully proficient. Given this, SSA is likely to experience declines in productivity as new staff replace more experienced staff. Therefore, SSA will need to do more to compensate for such declines.

Concluding Observations

While SSA is managing increasing workloads resulting from growing retirement and disability claims, it still faces the challenge of providing quality service. SSA's management of increased workloads came at a cost—the accuracy rate for SSI overpayments fell to the lowest level in 30 years, and some customer service continues to decline. These problems may become more severe as workloads continue to grow from the nation's baby boom generation, waves of SSA's most experienced staff retire, and the current level of field office staffing stays flat. Such challenges make it essential for SSA to develop a plan to manage its increasing workload. Whether SSA will need more resources or an altered field office infrastructure, or both, is unclear. We still believe that a detailed service delivery plan should make this clear, and if additional resources are needed to achieve agencywide goals, SSA should identify the resources required to meet long-term service delivery needs.

Mr. Chairman, this completes my prepared statement. I would be happy to respond to any questions you or other Members of the Subcommittee may have at this time.

Contacts and Acknowledgment

For further questions about this statement, please contact Barbara D. Bovbjerg at (202) 512-7215 or bovbjergb@gao.gov. Individuals making key contributions to this statement included Blake Ainsworth, Mary Crenshaw, Paul Wright, and Charlie Willson.

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