

**COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515**

September 15, 2020

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

The Social Security Administration (SSA) provides benefits and services that touch the lives of nearly all Americans. The overwhelming majority of workers – 94 percent – contribute to Social Security, and SSA provides benefits to nearly 70 million people through the Social Security and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs.

SSA provides a range of services to the public through its field offices, state Disability Determination Services (DDS) agencies, and Hearing Offices. For example, at its field offices, SSA calculates retirement benefits for individuals and determines whether disability benefit applicants meet the agency's non-medical eligibility criteria. The DDS agencies and Hearing Offices play important roles in adjudicating initial disability claims and appeals, respectively. SSA also issues Social Security numbers and maintains worker earnings information in support of its benefit programs and for other non-Social Security purposes. Beneficiaries also rely on SSA field office staff to answer questions about the application process, the law, their cases, and how to navigate the complex process of proving a disability.

The COVID-19 crisis presents a new set of unprecedented challenges for SSA in delivering services to the public. In response to the pandemic, SSA made the difficult, but necessary, decision to temporarily close all of its offices to in-person visitors, with limited exceptions. Due to the pandemic, SSA also prioritized its core mission work of paying benefits to eligible individuals and temporarily suspended many workloads that result in benefit reduction or termination.


We have supported these SSA actions to protect the safety of the public and agency employees while also ensuring that seniors, people with disabilities, and survivors continue to receive monthly Social Security and SSI benefits. At the same time, we have been concerned about the impact on vulnerable beneficiaries and applicants, and on individuals who need services that typically require an in-person visit to a local field office to get assistance from SSA. We are especially concerned about the disproportionate impact that the closure of field offices to in-person visitors has on historically underserved populations.

As SSA continues to explore ways to safely deliver services to the American people during the COVID-19 pandemic, we would like GAO to answer the following questions:


1. What service delivery challenges has SSA faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How has SSA changed its service delivery due to the COVID-19 crisis, including suspending certain services and workloads?
 - a. What services and workloads did SSA suspend at field offices, card centers, teleservice centers, program service centers, Disability Determination Services agencies, Hearing Offices, and the Appeals Council?
 - b. What exceptions did SSA provide for dire need or other reasons?
 - c. What services and workloads has SSA been able to resume? When and how?
3. What has been the impact of these challenges and changes on the public? Have these challenges and changes affected the public differently in the Social Security and SSI programs?
 - a. How has the performance of SSA's field offices, card centers, teleservice centers, program centers, Disability Determination Services agencies, Hearing Offices, and Appeals Council on core service metrics changed?
 - b. How have service and workload suspensions reduced the public's ability to access services from SSA?
 - c. Has the public been able to access exceptions for dire need or other reasons? To what extent is this access available uniformly at all field offices?
 - d. What are the indicators that vulnerable populations, including people of color, very low-income individuals, and people with disabilities, have been disadvantaged by field office closures to in-person visitors and service and workload suspensions?
 - e. What steps has SSA taken to mitigate this, and have these steps been effective?
4. What lessons does SSA's response offer for SSA's future service delivery and the ability of workers and beneficiaries – including those who are most vulnerable – to receive timely and expert assistance from SSA?

If you have any questions please contact Kathryn Olson, Majority Staff Director for the Social Security Subcommittee, and Morna Miller, Majority Staff Director for the Worker and Family Support Subcommittee, of the Committee on Ways and Means.

Sincerely,



John B. Larson
Chairman
Subcommittee on Social Security
Committee on Ways and Means
U.S. House of Representatives



Danny K. Davis
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