Social Security Customer Service Draws Scrutiny

Congress seeks answers on long waits at field offices as agency struggles with staff shortage

By
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The Social Security Administration (SSA) says it is taking steps to improve customer service following a summer of frustration for many who sought help at field offices that reopened in April after being largely shut down for more than two years due to the pandemic.

But mounting customer complaints, including long waits outside SSA offices in extreme heat as well as busy signals and disconnected calls to the agency’s national toll-free number, prompted questions last month from congressional leaders. In an Aug. 30 response, Kilolo Kijakazi, the SSA’s acting commissioner, outlined a series of ongoing steps and future remedies.

The success of those plans hinges on more than just Social Security’s powers of pandemic recovery. Years of being underfunded and understaffed also contributed to this summer of discontent, as the SSA faces an ongoing backlog of disability claims, an outdated phone system that won’t be replaced before early 2023, and the task of getting more than 1,200 field offices up to service speed.
These offices help older Americans navigate issues with retirement benefits, survivor benefits and Medicare as well as assisting with claims for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI), a safety-net benefit for older and disabled people with low incomes that in most cases cannot be applied for online.

In 2019, the last full year of normal field office operations, the SSA served 43 million people in person. What’s at stake now is consumer confidence in a system that serves nearly 68 million Americans.

“Agency-wide, we are at our lowest staffing level in 25 years, driven by years of insufficient funding and hiring freezes compounded by recent higher attrition,” Social Security spokesperson Nicole Tiggemann says in an email response to AARP.

Tiggemann says the SSA now has approximately 56,000 employees, a 7 percent drop from its pre-pandemic staff of 60,000.

The Biden administration is seeking $14.8 billion for the agency in its fiscal year 2023 budget, $1.8 billion more than the SSA received this year.

“We are exerting every effort to bring on as many hires as possible to replace our losses, but regardless, staffing levels will still be insufficient to meet our service needs without additional funding in the president’s FY 2023 budget request,” Tiggemann says.

Economist David Weaver, who spent more than two decades with Social Security as a researcher and policy analyst, says Congress fully funded the enforcement side of the
SSA’s current budget but “cut a billion from the president’s budget, and all of it was in the customer service portion to administer the program.”

AARP has called on Congress to approve the SSA’s full funding request but is also urging the agency to take more immediate steps to “ensure customers can reliably access SSA services” as winter approaches, Nancy LeaMond, AARP’s chief advocacy and engagement officer, wrote in a Sept. 12 letter to Kijakazi.

“We regularly hear from members who are frustrated by their interactions with the agency,” LeaMond wrote. “Seniors and those with disabilities simply should not be asked to wait in line outside in inclement weather to get the services they need.”

Long waits outside field offices “often are caused by physical distancing,” Kijakazi wrote in her response to questions from U.S. Reps. Richard Neal of Massachusetts and Kevin Brady of Texas, the chairman and the ranking member, respectively, of the House Ways and Means Committee. “We are updating our physical distancing policy for the public, which we expect will significantly address the concerns you raise,” she wrote.

The letter lists several steps the agency is taking to reduce lines at offices and improve conditions for those waiting, including:

— Sorting customers to determine who can be helped with a quick interview and who needs an appointment.

— Providing drop boxes at some offices for people to quickly submit documents and evidence.
— Reconfiguring air-conditioned waiting areas so that more customers can enter.

— Providing canopies and fans outside offices when possible.

— Suspending telework for some employees so offices can help more people in person.

— Increasing overtime, rehiring retired employees and assigning volunteers to boost staff and service options at busier offices.

Kijakazi’s letter also included details on incidents between April 7, when offices reopened, and mid-August in which field offices had 40 or more visitors waiting outside at 9 a.m. This happened 4,461 times at 216 offices during that period. More than two-thirds of these occurrences were at offices in Arizona, Florida, Nevada and Texas, where record heat prevailed this summer.

“Social Security needs to do better,” says U.S. Rep. Lloyd Doggett of Texas, a member of the Ways and Means Committee, which has oversight of Social Security. “If someone has to stand outside in the Texas heat for over an hour, that is certainly a failure.”

David Camp, a disability attorney in St. Louis, practices out of a building that also houses a local SSA office, giving him a firsthand view of the reopening process. He says Social Security "did not return to the field office functionality it had prior to the pandemic."

Camp is president of the National Organization of Social Security Claimants’ Representatives (NOSSCR), an association of more than 3,000 lawyers and disability advocates who specialize in Social Security cases. He contends some continuing
COVID-19 protocols and practices, including social distancing, remote work and steering people to schedule appointments rather than show up at offices, hinder access to some individuals in greatest need.

While it recommends appointments, the SSA says the vast majority of offices “have resumed in-person service for people without an appointment.” Camp says that in practice, many offices are “not taking walk-ins other than to schedule an appointment,” creating a barrier for claimants with severe impairments.

“Because it is a later-scheduled appointment, it causes all the same problems for the most limited applicants. A homeless person suffering with schizophrenia needs a drop-in structure,” he says. “We had local SSA offices available to help people for generations until COVID, and we are struggling with SSA not returning to what worked in the past.”

**Phone, online access encouraged**

Since field offices reopened, the SSA’s public communications and social media have encouraged people to call the agency’s national customer service number, 800-772-1213, or use the online [My Social Security platform](https://myss.ssa.gov) whenever possible.

Many routine SSA services can be accessed online or by phone, including applying for several types of benefits, getting estimates of monthly payments, requesting a replacement Medicare or Social Security card, and obtaining a benefit verification letter.

However, the national phone line has been plagued by service issues while the SSA implements a systemwide upgrade. A Sept. 6 post on the agency’s social media
accounts noted that callers might experience “busy signals, dropped calls, and long wait times. We sincerely apologize for any inconvenience and we appreciate your patience while we work to fully restore phone service.”

In July, the most recent month for which data is available, callers to the national number waited about 32 minutes on average to speak to an agent, up from 9 minutes a year earlier. The agency’s goal is to get answer times down to 12 minutes by Sept. 30, 2023, according to an SSA report.

Angela Digeronimo, a Social Security claims specialist, handles calls to her local office in Woodbridge, New Jersey, working remotely in both that role and as head of the American Federation of Government Employees union local that represents SSA field office and teleservice workers. She says telework offers “a better way of providing service to the public than the overcrowded waiting rooms and long wait times.”

“Telework is assisting our employees having work-life balance,” Digeronimo says. “The agency is not competitive in offering work-life balance. People want the telework. The number one thing candidates are asking is if the position is telework-eligible.”

Camp says working remotely is efficient for certain Social Security positions, such as the administrative law judges who hear appeals in disability benefit cases, but it’s not a magic bullet for what ails customer service.

“To pretend we can replace that in-person level of functioning with telework is ignoring what we’re seeing in terms of the facts and the numbers of people being serviced,” he
says. “There is no explanation other than it’s hard to get into an office, and there are not enough people when they’re getting there.”

While accessing services by phone or online can save many people a trip to a field office, Doggett says, it may not be the best approach for beneficiaries and claimants who are older or in poor physical or mental health.

“I know many seniors are not as adept at using such services,” he says. “I side with the view we need more employees back at the offices to take care of these problems. Virtual employees are just not an adequate solution to this problem.”

“While we understand your encouragement of the use of SSA’s online or telephone options,” LeaMond wrote in her letter to the agency, “we note that there are significant challenges with this strategy to reduce service issues in field offices.” Some services, such as applying for survivor benefits or SSI, cannot be completed online, she noted, and “even among those who do prefer online services, many who apply for Social Security benefits online ultimately turn to an in-person or phone consultation for assistance.”