

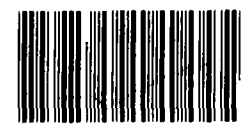
GAO

Report to Congressional Requesters

March 1987

# SOCIAL SECURITY

## Staff Reductions and Service Quality



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General Accounting Office  
Washington, D.C. 20548

**Human Resources Division**

B-226484

March 10, 1987

The Honorable Lawton Chiles, Chairman  
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and  
Human Services, and Education  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate

The Honorable William H. Natcher, Chairman  
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and  
Human Services, and Education  
Committee on Appropriations  
House of Representatives

This is the first of three required reports on Social Security Administration (SSA) staff reductions and the quality of service SSA provides to the public. The other two reports will be forwarded to you later this year.

This report (1) discusses changes in traditional SSA service level indicators, such as payment accuracy and claim processing time; (2) analyzes current and past SSA staffing levels; (3) presents the views of SSA employees, managers, and clients on the quality of SSA service; (4) analyzes workloads and processing times for 15 SSA field offices that experienced significant staff reductions; and (5) examines SSA staff reduction actions in implementing its fiscal year 1987 budget.

As arranged with your offices, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days from its issue date. At that time, we will send copies to other interested congressional committees and members; the Secretary of Health and Human Services; the Director, Office of Management and Budget; the Commissioner, SSA; and other interested parties. We will also make copies available to others upon request.

*Edward A. Hensmore*

*for* Richard L. Fogel  
Assistant Comptroller General

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# Executive Summary

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## Purpose

In January 1985, the administration announced its intention to reduce Social Security Administration (SSA) staff by 17,000, or 21 percent, through fiscal year 1990. Because such cuts could adversely affect SSA service, the House Appropriations Committee asked SSA to report quarterly on its service levels.

In the summer of 1986—because of concerns expressed about the objectivity of SSA's self-evaluation—the Senate and House Appropriations Committees asked GAO to report on SSA service. This is the first of three reports to be prepared for the Committees in 1987.

This report examines: (1) the quality of SSA service, (2) the effect of staff reductions on service, and (3) the nature and extent of past and planned staff reductions.

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## Background

The terms "service" and "quality" are broad and mean different things to different people. For this reason, GAO examined SSA quality of service from a number of different perspectives.

First, GAO examined the data SSA regularly accumulates to measure performance. These data show how accurately SSA pays and processes claims; how long it takes to process initial claims and appeals of SSA decisions; the amount of work waiting to be processed; and how long clients wait in SSA field offices before being served.

GAO also surveyed SSA clients, managers, and employees. SSA clients were asked their opinions on the quality of SSA service. SSA employees and mid-level managers were questioned about the quality of SSA service and the effect of staff reductions.

To determine whether there was any indication that staff reductions have had a significant adverse effect on service quality, GAO also visited 15 SSA district and branch offices that experienced an average 25-percent reduction in staff over the last 3 years. At these offices, GAO obtained employees' perspectives and reviewed data on processing times and workloads.

To identify the extent of actual staff reductions, GAO determined where the reductions took place and the types of positions affected. GAO also examined SSA plans for carrying out staff reductions for fiscal year 1987.

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## Results in Brief

SSA's traditional performance measures through December 1986 generally show stable performance since fiscal year 1984—the year before the start of the staff reduction program. Similarly, about 80 percent of SSA clients GAO surveyed said that overall the quality of SSA service was good.

Most SSA employees and SSA managers said service or performance was good, but most in both groups said staff reductions have had an adverse effect on operations. In the 15 offices GAO visited, the data analyzed generally indicated service levels comparable to the levels provided by all SSA offices nationally, with one exception—a significant increase in mean processing time for claims for Supplemental Security Income for the blind and disabled. The increase however does not appear to be related to field office staff reductions.

Concerning staff reductions, in fiscal year 1987—because of reductions in its budget—SSA is planning to reduce work-year use significantly below the levels suggested by the Congress. Overall, the 6 year staff reduction program is on schedule.

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## Principal Findings

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### Traditional Performance Indicators Generally Show Stability

Accuracy rates have generally remained stable since fiscal year 1984, according to SSA data. Payment accuracy for the Retirement and Survivors Insurance program, for example, was 99.5 percent of the total dollars paid in fiscal years 1984 and 1985 and increased to 99.6 percent in fiscal year 1986.

Processing time for initial claims and appeals have generally improved, except for disability-related claims. Times for disability claims have increased because of the additional time required by state disability agencies to implement 1984 legislative changes for mental impairment cases.

With few exceptions, nationally the backlogs for SSA's major workloads are down substantially from 1984 levels.

According to SSA, the average time claimants wait in SSA field offices before being interviewed declined steadily from the January-March 1986 quarter through the December 1986 quarter—from a reported 12.3

to 7.2 minutes. GAO, however, believes that wait times are understated because not all waiting time is measured and some field offices give special attention to reducing wait times when they are measured for study purposes. (See ch. 2)

**SSA Clients View Service as Good**

The preliminary results of a November 1986 GAO survey show that about 80 percent of SSA clients view SSA service overall as good to very good. These results are comparable to the results of an identical survey done by GAO in 1984. (See ch. 3)

**SSA Personnel Say Service Good but Reductions Are Having Adverse Effect**

About 88 percent of managers GAO surveyed in 1986 said that the performance of their units had improved or was comparable to service levels 3 years earlier. Similarly, 87 percent of employees said that service was the same or better than it was 3 years earlier.

For those who said their units lost staff (55 percent of employees and 66 percent of managers), most said the staff reductions have caused problems. Fifty-six percent of these employees said that staff reductions have had a negative effect on the ability of their units to produce quality work, citing in particular lower morale and increased stress. For the managers who lost staff, 71 percent said the reductions had a negative effect on their operations, citing in general decreased quality of work and decreased productivity. Further, 64 percent of all managers said they were understaffed. (See ch. 3)

**15 Field Offices—Service Deterioration in One Aspect Noted**

For the 15 field offices, GAO examined data on processing time for four types of benefit claims and data on pending workloads. GAO found significant deterioration in service for the time to process Supplemental Security Income claims for the blind and disabled, which on average increased about 23 days—from 74 to 97 days. For all offices nationally, the increase in time for these claims was only 4 days. The principal reason for the larger increase in the 15 field offices is the relatively higher processing times of two state disability agencies (New York and New Jersey) which make medical determinations for 5 of the 15 offices. (See ch. 4)

**Nature and Extent of Past Reductions**

Since fiscal year 1984, SSA reduced its total work-year use about 8 percent. Staff reductions were largest in the Office of Disability Operations (14 percent) and the Program Service Centers (13 percent). In SSA field

offices, data review technicians were reduced the most—about 23 percent.

From fiscal year 1984 through fiscal year 1986, SSA field office staffing declined 3.3 percent. While 58 percent of SSA's approximately 1,300 field offices had a net loss of staff for the period, 28 percent had a net staff gain, and 14 percent did not have any change. Most offices losing staff through fiscal year 1986 lost less than 10 percent of their staff. (See ch. 5)

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**SSA Increasing 1987 Staff Reductions**

Because of budgetary shortfalls totaling \$284 million, SSA plans to significantly reduce its fiscal year 1987 work-year use by about 5,300 below the 78,580 suggested by the Congress. SSA has stated, however, that it will monitor service closely and increase work-year use if necessary. (See ch. 5)

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**Staff Reduction on Schedule**

SSA's proposed fiscal year 1988 budget would reduce staffing by an additional 2,454 full-time equivalent positions. Such reduction would bring the total for the first 4 years of the 6-year staff reduction program to 10,606, or 13.3 percent below 1984 levels, and put the reduction on schedule through the first 4 years.

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**Recommendations**

GAO is making no recommendations.

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**Agency Comments**

Concerning waiting time in field offices, SSA acknowledged that reported times were understated, and said it plans to monitor the time not measured on an ad-hoc basis and will emphasize to field offices that reported data must be representative of normal practices.

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**Abbreviations**

<b>AFGE</b>	<b>American Federation of Government Employees</b>
<b>B/D</b>	<b>blind and disabled</b>
<b>DI</b>	<b>Disability Insurance</b>
<b>DRT</b>	<b>data review technician</b>
<b>FTE</b>	<b>full-time equivalent</b>
<b>GAO</b>	<b>General Accounting Office</b>
<b>HHS</b>	<b>Department of Health and Human Services</b>
<b>LAE</b>	<b>Limitation on Administrative Expense</b>
<b>ODO</b>	<b>Office of Disability Operations</b>
<b>OCRO</b>	<b>Office of Central Records Operations</b>
<b>OHA</b>	<b>Office of Hearings and Appeals</b>
<b>RSI</b>	<b>Retirement and Survivors Insurance</b>
<b>SSA</b>	<b>Social Security Administration</b>
<b>SSI</b>	<b>Supplemental Security Income</b>

# Introduction

In January 1985, the Social Security Administration (SSA) announced plans to reduce its staff by 17,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions through fiscal year 1990, about a 21-percent reduction in staff. The plan's announcement generated widespread concern that the reduction would impair SSA's ability to provide quality service to its clients. SSA has maintained that service will not be adversely affected, saying that because of planned system and procedural enhancements, fewer staff will be needed.

Despite SSA assurances, in House Report No. 99-289/dated September 26, 1985, the House Committee on Appropriations directed the commissioner of social security to periodically report to the Committee on the quality of SSA service. The report stated:

"The staffing and facilities issues have brought into focus the concern of this Committee and the Congress as a whole that levels of service be maintained for Social Security beneficiaries and the public in general. In order to better evaluate the effect of changes in Social Security's administrative activities on service, it is essential that the Committee have dependable data on what is happening in the field. This includes regional and national average processing time for processing new or revised claims, posting of earnings or appealing decisions; the accuracy of payments as measured by existing quality control programs; and finally the convenience to the public as measured by commuting and waiting times, etc."

The Committee asked that SSA report quarterly for at least the next 2 fiscal years, and in March 1986, SSA delivered its first report covering the quarter ended December 1985. Three additional reports were issued, the last for the quarter ended September 1986. The reports contained data on SSA's traditional performance indicators, which include payment accuracy, claims processing times for initial claims, and the nature and extent of work backlogs.

In July 1986, the House Appropriations Committee directed the Comptroller General to take over the responsibility for preparing the reports on SSA performance. In its report (99-711), the Committee stated:

"The issues of staffing levels and field office closings continue to be of great concern to the Congress. Last year the Committee required the Commissioner of Social Security to submit quarterly reports on various measures of service to the public. This information is being used to monitor the effect of staffing and other administrative changes on the public. . . ."

“While these reports have been very useful to the Committee, there has been substantial concern expressed regarding the objectivity of this self-evaluation. The Committee, therefore, requests that the Comptroller General take over the responsibility for the preparation of these reports in fiscal year 1987. The Committee expects SSA to cooperate fully with the GAO and will expect reports on February 15, June 15, and October 15, 1987. This revised report should be expanded to include staffing levels for the Office of Central Records Operations, the Payment Service Centers, the Office of Disability Operations, the Regional Commissioners (with a breakdown for field offices), and the Office of Hearings and Appeals (with a breakdown for hearing offices). The February 15 report should include historical data on changes in staffing levels over the last 5 years both overall and within the various subdivisions of SSA.”

The Senate Appropriations Committee—in Report No. 858 dated August 15, 1986—also expressed concerns about the quality of SSA service and asked GAO to monitor SSA services and provide reports in February, June, and October 1987.

In subsequent discussions with committee staff, it was agreed that we would provide the first report just prior to the fiscal year 1988 appropriations hearings scheduled for mid-March 1987 rather than February 15, 1987. The change provided additional time to incorporate into the report statistics on SSA performance in the first quarter of fiscal year 1987 and its proposed fiscal year 1988 staff reductions.

## Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Our objectives were to (1) assess the quality of SSA service, (2) identify the nature and extent of SSA staff reductions, and (3) determine the effect of staff reductions on service.

To assess the quality of SSA's service, we first compared SSA performance data on key service indicators from fiscal year 1984 through the first quarter of fiscal year 1987. The indicators included payment accuracy, processing times for claims and appeals, workloads pending, and client wait time in field offices. These were selected from among the major performance indicators contained in SSA's four earlier reports to the House Appropriations Committee on the quality of SSA service.

Earnings postings and client commute times to SSA field offices—while discussed in the earlier SSA reports—are not addressed in this report. The biggest problem in recent years with earnings postings—a 39-month postings backlog in the early 1980's—has been eliminated, and earnings are now posted in about 9 months from date of receipt. Commute times were reported as a means of measuring the service impact resulting

from office closings. There were no SSA field office closings in the first quarter of fiscal year 1987.

To determine how SSA clients view the quality of the service they receive, we mailed a client satisfaction survey to a nationwide sample of 1,745 clients in November 1986. The survey questionnaire, composed of 44 questions, covered such issues as employee courtesy, waiting times, clarity of program explanations and notices, and overall satisfaction with SSA service. While the sampling strategy was designed to yield an expected sampling error of  $\pm 5$  percent at the 95-percent confidence level, the results reported herein are preliminary and are based on a response rate of 70 percent as of January 10, 1987.

The questionnaire was identical to one we sent to clients in November 1984, the results of which were reported in our January 1986 report, Social Security: Quality of Services Generally Rated High by Clients Sampled (GAO/HRD-86-8). Thus, the November 1986 survey not only provides current information on client satisfaction, but also provides an opportunity to analyze whether the public's perception of SSA has changed between 1984 and 1986—a period when the agency absorbed about 4,500 of the projected 17,000 FTE staff reduction.

To obtain the views of SSA employees and mid-level managers about staff reductions, service levels, and other issues, we sent questionnaires to samples of these groups as part of a separate review of SSA's management. Our report on that review, entitled Social Security Administration: Stable Leadership and Better Management Needed to Improve Effectiveness, (GAO/HRD-87-39) will be issued on March 18, 1987. The questionnaire strategy used in this review was designed to yield a sampling error of plus or minus 5 percent at a 95-percent confidence level for each group sampled.

The questionnaires to SSA employees were mailed in March 1986. We mailed 1,094 questionnaires to a nationwide random sample of SSA employees at grade levels GS-5 through GS-13; 905, or 83 percent responded. The sample covered employees, such as claims and service representatives, benefit and claims authorizers, and computer and programming specialists, or about 60 percent of all SSA employees working in Headquarters and field facilities. The questionnaire obtained employees' perspectives about personnel and operational issues such as morale, work assignments, supervision, systems improvements, training and development, and performance appraisals. Also obtained were

employees' opinions on the effect of staff reductions and the quality of service to the public.

SSA mid-level managers were mailed a questionnaire in June 1986. The questionnaire was sent to all headquarters deputy associate commissioners, office and division directors, and deputy office and division directors, except for those in SSA's Office of Management, Budget, and Personnel, which is responsible for administrative and support functions. At the field level the questionnaire was also sent to all field deputy regional commissioners, assistant regional commissioners, area managers, deputy program service center directors, program service center process branch managers, regional chief administrative law judges, administrative law judges-in-charge in field hearings offices, and data operations center managers. To obtain the views of SSA's field office managers, questionnaires were also sent to 291 randomly selected district/branch office managers.

In total, we mailed questionnaires to 813 mid-level managers; 645 mid-level managers, or 80 percent of those sampled, responded. The questionnaire covered managers' perspectives on such issues as organizational environment, policy, planning, budgeting, staffing, and performance management, and asked about the adequacy of staffing, the effects of staff reductions, and current and past unit performance.

While we believe the responses to the employee and mid-level manager questionnaires provide useful insights on service and staffing, we also believe caution should be used in interpreting their results. For example, questions about service quality and unit performance are likely to receive positive responses; negative responses could be considered self-incriminating. Further, as a general rule, we believe managers tend to resist reductions of their staff. Likewise, employees will resist reductions if the reductions are perceived as (1) increasing the amount of work they have to do and/or (2) threatening their job security.

To study the potential effect of staff reductions on individual field offices, we visited 15 offices that experienced large staff cuts since fiscal year 1983. We postulated that if staff loss has adversely affected service, the adverse effects should be manifest to a greater and more visible extent in offices that have had larger proportionate loss of staff.

Our purpose in visiting these offices was to determine if there was any substance to the allegation that staff reductions were having a significant adverse effect on service. Our sample size and study methodology

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precluded us from making any inferences about what has happened or might happen nationally but enabled us to determine whether there was an indication of significant service deterioration in the offices visited.

We selected the 15 field offices from 3 of the 10 SSA regions and from 10 states to obtain some geographical diversity. The offices were selected primarily on the basis of the number and percentage of staff lost. On average, the 15 offices we visited lost about 25 percent of their staff during the fiscal year 1983-1986 period.<sup>1</sup> In comparison, staffing declined 3.3 percent in the same period for all offices nationally and 11.9 percent for only those offices that lost staff. Secondary considerations in selecting offices were office size and location. Most SSA offices have fewer than 50 staff and our selections generally followed the same distribution. Concerning location, we attempted to cover several different states.

The field offices we visited are listed in table 1.1.

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<sup>1</sup>Staff loss for each year was computed on the basis of the average end-of-month staffing levels reported by the field offices.



**Table 1.1: Location, Size, and Staff Loss for the 15 Offices Visited**

	Number of staff, September 30, 1983	Staff loss—October 1, 1983, to September 30, 1986	
		Number	Percent
<b>SSA Region 2—New York:</b>			
New Rochelle, NY	32	8	25
Jersey City, NJ	105	22	21
New York City, (Brooklyn)—Bedford	32	11	34
New York City, (Manhattan)— Downtown	102	36	35
Schenectady, NY	49	10	20
<b>SSA Region 3—Philadelphia:</b>			
Wilmington, DE	71	17	24
Philadelphia, PA (Kensington and Allegheny Aves )	28	4	14
Baltimore, MD (West)	22	7	32
Altoona, PA	30	6	20
Martinsburg, WV	17	3	18
<b>SSA Region 5—Chicago:</b>			
Galesburg, IL	24	6	25
Peoria, IL	59	14	24
Detroit, MI (Conner Ave.)	30	5	17
Euclid, OH	19	5	26
Indianapolis (West), IN	27	10	37
<b>Total</b>	<b>647</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>25</b>

At each of the 15 offices, we obtained staff opinions on selected issues, including

- the adequacy of current staffing,
- the current level of service provided to the public, and
- the impact of future staff reductions.

In total, we interviewed 89 employees, including 15 office managers, 12 representatives of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) (3 offices did not have a union representative), and 50 claims representatives and service representatives. The managers were interviewed for their overall perspective on office operations and the AFGE representatives because the union has been vocal in opposition to staff reductions at SSA. Finally, claims representatives and service representatives were interviewed because they have the most face to face contact with the public at SSA field offices.

We examined available SSA performance data for those offices. Specifically, for fiscal years 1983-86, we analyzed processing times for initial claims and workload data for the nine most labor intensive workloads for which receipts, clearances, and pendings are reported. These workloads include initial claims for the Retirement and Survivors Insurance (RSI), Disability Insurance (DI), and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs, and SSI redeterminations. In fiscal year 1986, these nine workloads accounted for about 70 percent of all field office resources.

To examine staffing changes in field offices nationwide, we obtained office level staffing data for SSA's approximately 1,300 field offices, and determined the number of offices in which staff increased, decreased, or remained the same for the fiscal year 1983-86 period. For offices that lost staff, we determined the percentage and number of staff lost and stratified the results. Finally, we determined the extent to which the various field office staff positions (such as clericals and claims representatives) have been affected by staff cuts.

Our review was made during 1986 through February 1987 and, except as stated below, was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Because of time constraints, however, we were unable to validate SSA's performance data. For some of the data, however, we determined what controls SSA has and/or what validations it makes to ensure the data's integrity. We also questioned SSA staff to obtain their views on the data's integrity.



# Traditional Performance Indicators Generally Show Stable Service Levels

Traditional SSA performance indicators—payment and process accuracy, claims and appeals processing times, and pending workloads—generally show stability since fiscal year 1984, the year before the agency started implementing its staff reduction initiative. Field office interview wait time data, which SSA began collecting in 1986, show that client wait time has declined each quarter. We believe, however, that reported wait time is understated because not all field office wait time is included in SSA's data and, in some cases, offices take special steps to minimize waiting times when they are measured. This chapter discusses these performance indicators and compares them from fiscal year 1984 through the first quarter of 1987, where data were available as of March 1, 1987.

## Accuracy Rates Remain Stable

### Payment Accuracy

SSA performance data show that since 1984, payment accuracy rates—the percentage of benefit dollars paid accurately—have generally remained stable for the RSI (which includes disability claims) and SSI programs. Table 2.1 shows the payment accuracy rates for these programs for fiscal years 1984-86. As of March 1, 1987, SSA had not developed RSI and SSI payment accuracy rates for the first quarter of fiscal year 1987 or for the SSI program for fiscal year 1986.

**Table 2.1: RSI and SSI Payment Accuracy Rates**

Program	Fiscal Year			First quarter 1987
	1984	1985	1986	
RSI	99.5	99.5	99.6	•
SSI	96.7	96.7	•	•

### Process Accuracy

SSA performance statistics show that since fiscal year 1984, SSI process accuracy—the percentage of claims processed that were free of payment error—has remained stable. The rates by fiscal year for the 1984-86 period were 97.6, 97.6, and 97.9, respectively. SSA compiles RSI process accuracy rates quarterly, not annually. Table 2.2 shows the quarterly accuracy rates for the RSI and SSI programs for the most recent 5 quarters. As of March 1, 1987, SSA had not developed SSI data for the December 1986 quarter.

**Table 2.2: RSI and SSI Process Accuracy Rates**

Figures in percents

	Quarter				
	December 1985	March 1986	June 1986	September 1986	December 1986
RSI	96.9	96.6	97.6	97.3	96.6
SSI	98.1	97.8	97.8	98.2	•

According to SSA, the lower RSI process accuracy rates for December and March reflect normal seasonal variations. The SSI rates generally were stable during the period.

Disability process accuracy rates reflect the percentage of disability claims in which medical eligibility for benefits has been correctly determined. Medical determinations of disability claimants' impairments are made for SSA by the states. Table 2.3 shows disability process accuracy rates for both initial claims and reconsiderations where medical eligibility was the entitlement issue. Data for reconsiderations for the first quarter of fiscal year 1987 were not available as of March 1, 1987.

**Table 2.3: Disability Process Accuracy Rates for Initial Claims and Reconsiderations**

Figures in percents

Fiscal year	Initial claims	Reconsiderations
1984	94.9	94.2
1985	96.3	95.4
1986	96.6	95.5
1987 <sup>a</sup>	92.8	•

<sup>a</sup>First quarter

As table 2.3 shows, the accuracy of initial disability claims processed dropped sharply in the first quarter of fiscal year 1987. SSA officials said this is due to the inclusion of mental impairment claims in the overall statistics. These claims had been excluded from overall statistical reports during much of 1986 because of extensive changes in the medical evidence requirements for these claims. When major programmatic changes occur, SSA temporarily excludes affected claims. SSA officials said DI initial claims accuracy should improve as the states gain further experience in adjudicating claims under the new rules. With respect to reconsiderations, the table shows that process accuracy has increased since fiscal year 1984.

## Processing Time Performance Varies

### Initial Claims

Table 2.4 shows the mean processing times for SSA's initial claims workloads from fiscal year 1984 through the first quarter of fiscal year 1987. Overall, the table shows that processing times have increased for two workloads (DI and SSI-blind and disabled [B/D] claims) and decreased for two (RSI and SSI-aged).

**Table 2.4: Mean Processing Times for Initial Claims**

Claim type	Fiscal year				Days change 1984-87	Percent change 1984-87
	1984	1985	1986	First quarter 1987		
RSI <sup>a</sup>	24	22	21	20	-4	-17
Disability	70	70	81	79	+9	+13
SSI-Aged	15	12	10	11	-4	-27
SSI-B/D	74	65	78	80	+6	+8

<sup>a</sup>Days rounded to the nearest whole day.

<sup>a</sup>Includes health insurance claims

The processing times for DI and SSI-B/D claims include the processing times of state disability agencies. SSA attributes the increase in the processing times for those claims primarily to implementation of the 1984 disability reform legislation, which required more extensive development of mental impairment cases. The general decrease in processing times for RSI and SSI-aged workloads is attributed to increased automation of the claims workload and the establishment of an accelerated claims system for processing less complex claims. Included as appendix I are national processing times for initial claims for the last 5 quarters—December 1985 through December 1986.

On a regional basis, processing times for the initial claims workload vary significantly. For example, during the December 1986 quarter, the Boston Region's mean processing time for an RSI claim was 23 days, while the Philadelphia Region's was 15 days. SSA explained the reasons for such regional variations in its first report on the quality of service:

"Variations among regions in the processing of workloads have always existed and are the result of a variety of factors, including client characteristics, socioeconomic conditions, the relative performance of Disability State Agencies, geographic area

served, etc. In some instances, variations can be caused by the law. An SSI claim, for example, is a much more difficult work unit in States with supplemental benefits and complex living arrangement situations than in those States which do not include those legal conditions."

Regional mean claims processing times for the December 1985 and December 1986 quarters are presented in appendix II.

**Appeals**

Reconsiderations—the first level of appeal—are made in SSA field offices and by state disability agencies for DI claims. Since 1984, their mean processing time increased 10 days. Hearings—the second level of appeal—are performed in Office of Hearings and Appeals (OHA) field offices, and since 1984 their mean processing time decreased 6 days. The mean processing time for appeals for fiscal years 1984 through the first quarter of fiscal year 1987 are shown in table 2.5.

**Table 2.5: Mean Processing Times for Appeals of SSA Decisions\***

Figures in days

	1984	1985	1986	First quarter 1987	Days change 1984-87	Percent change 1984-87
Reconsiderations	51	53	65	61	+10	+20
Hearings	185	167	172	179	-6	-3.2

\*Does not include times for reconsiderations of SSI decisions, SSA currently does not track SSI reconsideration time

According to SSA, the increase in reconsideration times in fiscal year 1986 resulted from the 1984 disability reform legislation's requirements for more extensive development of medical evidence, particularly for mental impairment cases.

Like processing times for initial claims, processing times for appeals also vary by SSA region. Appendix III contains the regional processing times for reconsiderations and hearings for the last 5 quarters—December 1985 through December 1986.

**Pending Workloads  
Show Overall Decline**

On an overall basis, SSA's major pending workloads in fiscal year 1986 were down substantially from the levels at the end of fiscal year 1984. Table 2.6 shows the changes for those workloads.

Chapter 2  
 Traditional Performance Indicators Generally  
 Show Stable Service Levels

**Table 2.6: Pending for SSA's Major Workloads**

	Workloads in thousands <sup>a</sup>				Percent change	
	Fiscal year			First quarter 1987		
	1984	1985	1986		(84-86)	(86-87)
<b>Field offices:</b>						
RSI claims <sup>b</sup>	151	155	116	108	-23	-7
DI claims	260	233	277	233	+7	-16
SSI-aged claims	13	6	5	3	-62	-40
SSI-B/D claims	169	218	247	218	+46	-12
RSI and SSI overpayments <sup>b</sup>	122	86	106	101	-13	-5
<b>Program service centers:</b>						
RSI claims <sup>b</sup>	92	86	59	53	-36	-10
Overpayments	55	31	16	15	-71	-6
<b>Office of Disability Operations:</b>						
DI claims	49	36	19	18	-61	-5
<b>Office of Central Records Operations:</b>						
Certified wage records for RSI and DI claims	86	58	68	47	-21	-31
<b>Office of Hearings and Appeals:</b>						
Hearings	108	107	117	133	+8	+14

<sup>a</sup>Rounded to nearest thousand

<sup>b</sup>Includes health insurance claims

The table shows that pendings for three workloads (DI initial claims, SSI B/D initial claims, and OHA requests for hearings) increased from fiscal year 1984 to fiscal year 1986, while pendings for all other workloads declined. SSA officials attributed the increase in DI and SSI B/D initial claims pending to the effect of the 1984 disability reform amendments, and attributed the increase in OHA hearings pending to a sizable increase in the number of requests for hearings. For example, in fiscal year 1986, hearings receipts in the last quarter increased nearly 50 percent over the number received in the first quarter.

**Wait Times Understated**

According to SSA, the average time SSA clients wait to be interviewed in field offices has declined steadily since the March 1986 quarter—the first quarter for which SSA collected wait time data nationally. Table 2.7 shows client wait times for the past 4 quarters as measured by SSA.



**Table 2.7: SSA Field Office Client Wait Times**

	Quarter ending			
	March 1986	June 1986	September 1986	December 1986
Number of visitors sampled	64,793	75,358	69,633	63,684
Average wait time (in minutes)	12.3	10.3	8.9	7.2
<b>Percent of visitors who waited:</b>				
0-5 minutes	53	57	60	62
6-15 minutes	22	22	21	20
16-30 minutes	12	11	11	11
31-45 minutes	6	5	4	3
46-60 minutes	3	2	2	3
Over 60 minutes	4	3	2	1

These data, however, do not completely reflect the length of time individuals spend in field offices waiting for service. SSA's sampling methodology does not measure all the wait time experienced by the public, and some SSA field offices change normal operating practices to reduce wait time during the sampling period.

SSA wait times reported do not include time individuals wait to see a receptionist; instead, they measure only the time from the point a client sees a receptionist to the point that the client sees an SSA interviewer. To learn how long individuals spent waiting to see a receptionist, SSA conducted a special study at 75 offices for 2 weeks in August 1986. The study showed that 41 percent of the visitors had no wait before seeing a receptionist. The 59 percent that did not have direct access to a receptionist, however, waited an average of 8.8 minutes.

Another aspect of wait time not measured by SSA is the time individuals spend waiting in "speed lines," which is a technique that directs individuals whose visit can be handled quickly to designated locations or stations. While this can be a good technique for reducing wait times, four American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) representatives said speed lines are being used too much, to the point that some speed lines now have long wait times. SSA has instructed field offices—for wait time study purposes—to assume that individuals in speed lines have zero wait times. Consequently, some amount of wait time may not be captured as part of SSA's data.

Finally, interview wait times measured and reported to SSA's central office by the field offices in some cases are not representative of actual wait times because normal practices are not followed during the sampling period. For example, individuals in 6 of the 15 field offices we visited (see chapter 4) said that during the wait time sampling period—a predetermined 30-minute period per week in each field office—offices change their procedures to reduce wait time. Typically, more claims representatives are assigned to conduct interviews of individuals who enter the office during that 30-minute period, and more service representatives are present in office reception areas. The changes have the effect of reducing interview wait time.

The employees' comments in these six offices were reiterated in a written statement by a claims representative. The statement was provided to us by a representative of AFGE, and stated in part:

"This placid scenario [normal receptioning procedures] changes, however, when the waiting time study sample period comes. Management gets extremely agitated about the people waiting and they round up all available interviewers to take care of the people, whether it is crowded or not. If there are two RSI interviews waiting and both the primary and secondary interviewers are interviewing, they will have another CR [claims representative] interview. This does not occur outside of the sample period. They watch over the interviewing area like hawks for the entire sample time. This is especially true if the sample time occurs during an extremely busy time."

In discussing our observations on waiting time data, SSA officials acknowledged that their study methodology does not capture all wait time at SSA field offices. They said, however, that generally the data collected is adequate to monitor this aspect of SSA service. Concerning the wait time that is not measured, the officials said—because of the cost to capture all wait time—they prefer to monitor these wait times on an ad hoc basis, such as the study which examined the time clients spent waiting to see the receptionist. Concerning the change of office procedures during the wait time study period, SSA officials said they will emphasize to field offices that they report data representative of normal practices.

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## Other Performance Data Not Collected

We issued in 1986 two reports which addressed the need for SSA to expand its collection of performance data.

The first report, issued in January 1986, (see p. 12) pointed out that SSA does not routinely assess client satisfaction with its service and recommended that SSA conduct periodic client surveys. SSA agreed with GAO's recommendation and developed a plan for doing so. The plan was approved by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) on January 29, 1987, and calls for conducting client surveys under a contract arrangement. According to SSA, data on the first survey should be available in the summer of 1988.

The other report—entitled Social Security: Improved Telephone Accessibility Would Better Serve the Public (GAO/HRD-86-85)—was issued in August 1986. The report was based on a nationwide test of the public's access to SSA via telephone (e.g. how often did a caller get a busy signal and, if put on hold, how long was the wait) and showed that access to SSA by phone varied greatly across the country.

Because SSA had little information on the accessibility of its phone service, we recommended that SSA periodically measure and evaluate service provided by telephone answering facilities. In a letter to GAO dated January 13, 1987, HHS agreed with GAO's recommendations and said that responsibilities to implement the above recommendation would be assigned to the appropriate SSA components in the near future.

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## Reliability of SSA Performance Data

Because of the importance of SSA performance data in monitoring the quality of SSA service, we examined the integrity of certain data. The extent of our examination and our observations are discussed below.

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## Payment and Process Accuracy

We did not validate the SSA payment and process accuracy data contained in this report. Currently, however, we have underway an assessment of the validity of the payment accuracy rates for the RSI program. A report on our assessment is expected in mid-1987.

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## Processing Times

Claims processing times are derived from SSA automated systems which track for each claim the time from date of application to the date of allowance or denial decisions. Under certain circumstances, SSA procedures allow claims to be removed from the systems prior to date of allowance or denial. For example, if an incorrect account number were

established, field office employees can delete the claim in question from the system. This in turn can have the effect of reducing overall field office processing time, particularly when old claims are deleted.

A common allegation is that—to reduce processing time—field office personnel are inappropriately deleting or removing claims from the automated tracking systems. In pursuing this allegation, we inquired into SSA controls over the use of deletions and found that SSA tracks the use of all deletions by all field offices. Consequently, for each field office, SSA has the capability to determine if the use of such deletions are increasing or are excessive in comparison with other offices.

In examining monthly national data on the use of deletions from July 1985 to January 1987, we found that use of deletions was infrequent (for example, about 1.3 percent of all RSI and DI claims) and did not vary significantly from month to month. We did not examine the use of such deletions by individual offices or the extent that SSA field office management used the deletion data to monitor field office performance.

Concerning processing times for hearings, we inquired into what steps OHA takes to assure that its processing time data are accurate. We found that OHA central office staff periodically visit each of its 134 field offices to compare reported processing times with source documents in field office files. OHA officials said that—on the basis of these reviews—the data reported are reliable, particularly when aggregated at the national level.

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**Waiting Time in SSA Field Offices**

The inadequacies of SSA's wait-time data were discussed starting on page 22.



# Questionnaire Respondents Generally View Service as Good but Are Concerned About Staff Reductions

SSA clients, employees, and mid-level managers generally consider SSA's performance or service to be good, and as good as or better than it was a few years ago. Most employees and mid-level managers, however, expressed the view that staff reductions had adversely affected their units.

About 80 percent of SSA clients rated SSA's service as good to very good, according to the preliminary results of a survey questionnaire we mailed in November 1986. These findings are similar to the results of the same survey we conducted 2 years earlier. Similarly, about 92 percent of SSA employees rating SSA service—in a March 1986 GAO survey—said it was good to very good. When asked to compare service then with that of 3 years earlier, 88 percent of the employees that made the comparison said service then was the same or better. Finally, according to a GAO survey of SSA's mid-level managers in June 1986, 88 percent said the performance of their units had improved or remained stable over the last 2 years.

Concerning staffing, 64 percent of SSA's mid-level managers said their units were understaffed. In units that had lost staff, 56 percent of the employees and 71 percent of the managers said the reductions have had an adverse effect on their units' ability to produce quality work.

## Client Satisfaction Remains High

Table 3.1 is a comparison between 1984 and 1986 of SSA's clients' responses to some of the key questions about service. As can be seen, generally there is little difference between the 1984 and 1986 responses, but in all cases, client satisfaction or service has improved since 1984.

Chapter 3  
**Questionnaire Respondents Generally View  
 Service as Good but Are Concerned About  
 Staff Reductions**

**Table 3.1: Preliminary Results of Client  
 Survey Comparison\***

Figures in percents*			
	1984	1986	Increase (decrease)
<b>Quality of service by SSA:</b>			
Overall:			
Good to very good	78	80	2
Fair	14	14	0
Poor to very poor	7	6	(1)
Compared to other government agencies:			
Somewhat to much better	51	55	4
About as good	43	41	(2)
Somewhat to much worse	7	5	(2)
<b>Mail from SSA:</b>			
Understandability of mail:			
Generally to very easy	67	78	11*
Neither easy nor difficult	15	11	(4)
Generally to very difficult	18	11	(7)*
<b>Visits to SSA offices:</b>			
Time spent waiting for service:			
Less than 5 minutes	6	8	2
5 to less than 15 minutes	28	30	2
15 to less than 30 minutes	33	32	(1)
30 minutes or more	33	30	(3)
Courtesy of employees:			
Generally to very courteous	89	91	2
Neither courteous nor discourteous	7	7	0
Generally to very discourteous	4	2	(2)*
Explanation of programs and rules:			
Clearly	72	76	4
Somewhat clearly	22	21	(1)
Unclearly	6	4	(2)*
How SSA has handled your business so far:			
Good to very good job	73	76	3*
Fair job	15	14	(1)
Poor to very poor job	12	10	(2)
<b>Phone calls to SSA:</b>			
Number of attempts to reach SSA.			
Got through on first try	47	52	5*
2 times	28	26	(2)
3 times	11	11	0
More than 3 times	14	11	(3)

**Chapter 3  
Questionnaire Respondents Generally View  
Service as Good but Are Concerned About  
Staff Reductions**

<b>Phone calls to SSA:</b>	<b>1984</b>	<b>1986</b>	<b>Increase (decrease)</b>
<b>Courtesy of employees:</b>			
Generally to very courteous	89	90	1*
Neither courteous nor discourteous	8	8	0
Generally to very discourteous	3	2	(1)
<b>Explanation of program and rules:</b>			
Clearly	70	72	2
Somewhat clearly	23	24	1
Unclearly	7	4	(3)*
<b>How SSA has handled your business so far.</b>			
Good to very good job	75	78	3*
Fair job	15	14	(1)
Poor to very poor job	10	9	(1)

\*Percents may not add to 100 because of rounding

\*Indicates a statistically significant difference.

While service generally has improved and client satisfaction remains high, the data also show that one in three people wait 30 minutes or more for service in field offices and about half don't get through to SSA on their first telephone call.

## **Employees Say Service Better Than in Past**

Of the employees who responded to our March 1986 questionnaire, 92 percent rated their unit's service as good to very good; 52 percent said their unit's service then was somewhat or much better than it was 3 years earlier while 35 percent said their unit's service had remained about the same.

Of the 905 employees who responded to the questionnaire, 372 provided 558 narrative examples as to why or what about their unit's work or service to the public was better than 3 years ago. The examples most frequently covered the following issues:

- Faster processing time (102).
- Greater accuracy (83).
- More experienced personnel (77).
- Additional or increased use of automation (49).
- Improved staff training (34).
- More quality control (26).

A sampling of employees' narrative comments follows:



- "Improvements to software that significantly reduced manual operations by district office personnel."
- "Our staff is more experienced now."
- "Our processing time for initial claims has been reduced since 3 years ago."
- "State of the art in software and hardware is vastly improved over 3 years ago. This allows us better methods, response time, and quality of product."
- "We have been given some 'quiet time' when we can do our desk work undisturbed. This has made our work-flow much better."
- "Low turnover of skilled technicians, hence improvement due to more experience."

In contrast, 88 employees provided 118 narrative examples as to why or what about their units' work or service to the public was worse than 3 years ago. The examples most frequently covered the following issues:

- Insufficient Staff Resources (21).
- Hurried Interviews (16).
- Increased Workload (14).
- Increased Payment Errors (12).
- Emphasis on Quantity over Quality (11).

A sampling of employees' narrative comments follows:

- "Branch office converted to a Resident Station, combined with loss of personnel, results in inadequate number of people to properly perform duties, requires work not in job description."
- "Reduced staffing has increased waiting times for interviews. Clerical staff is definitely overburdened, unable to file cases . . ."
- "We are forced to handle large volumes of work with less people and we hurry thru interviews in order to clear as many claims as possible."

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**Staff Reductions Are Said to  
Have an Adverse Impact**

About 55 percent of the employees said their units lost staff in fiscal year 1985 and about 56 percent of these said that the loss had a somewhat (40 percent) or significant (16 percent) negative effect on the ability of their units to produce quality work. A total of 234 employees provided 418 examples of the adverse effect. The most frequent examples were:

- Larger workloads to process for remaining staff (113).
- Lower morale, and more stress, apathy, and frustration (84).

- Backlogs and untimely processing of workloads (61).
- Less accuracy in their work (36).
- Tasks inappropriate for grade level (34).

A sampling of narrative comments from employees follows:

- “Results in more work per person. An increase in ‘other duties as assigned’—We are a small small office and we all wear several ‘hats’.”
- “Backlog.”
- “We still had the same amount of work but less people to complete the work . . . The work was not processed timely and the service to the public was not at its best.”
- “In conclusion, I have no major problems with my job or work environment except for having to combat the ever-declining morale which exists in the agency as a whole.”

## Employee Morale Is Low

Concerning employee morale, 53 percent of all employee respondents characterized their units’ morale as generally to very low; 19 percent said it was generally to very high.

We asked those employees whose units had low or very low morale to check from a listing of possible reasons why their unit’s morale was low. Table 3.2 shows reasons given for low morale.

**Table 3.2: Reasons Cited by Employees for Their Poor Morale**

Figures in percents	
Reason	Frequency cited
Poor promotion potential	63
Too much emphasis on measures such as timeliness, productivity, etc.	56
Not enough emphasis on employee development	54
Uneven workload distribution	47
Poor supervision in unit	35
Expectation of a reduction-in-force	35
Poor management in unit	32
Other reasons than those listed	32
Lack of stable leadership in SSA	30
Uncertainty as to future of job	26
Necessary training not available	22
Uncertainty as to future of unit	20
Increasing technological change	17

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## **Mid-Level Managers See Performance Stable or Improving but Are Concerned About Future Staff Reductions**

Most managers classified the performance of their units as "improving" (46 percent) or "stable" (42 percent) over the last 2 years. Only 12 percent said their units' performance was declining. The two factors which mid-level managers cited as greatly affecting declining performance were changes in staff levels and in staff morale.

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## **Staff Cuts Seen as Affecting Operations Adversely**

About 66 percent of the mid-level managers indicated that their unit lost staff in fiscal year 1985. Of these, 71 percent believed the staff loss had a somewhat (55 percent) or significant (16 percent) negative effect on their units' operation. In explaining the effect, 277 mid-level managers furnished 373 examples, the most frequently mentioned being:

- Decreased quality and less work processed (101).
- Added work for remaining employees (67).
- Increased client waiting time for service (48).
- Loss of best or key employees (38).
- Lower morale and more stress and frustration (35).
- Shortages of support or clerical staff (28).

A sampling of mid-level managers' comments follows:

- "Heavy loss of highly trained personnel has affected the quantity of work, the quality of work and significant negative effect on morale/frustration levels."
- "We are reaching the point where instead of doing more with less, we are doing less with less."
- "Today we are doing much of our work using temporaries, college work study students, summer aides, stay-in-schoolers. The constant training of these employees due to turnover impacts heavily on management time. We are holding the line with their help. If they leave—problems."
- "Less staff—more work. Clerical losses caused other positions to absorb clerical tasks. Everything suffers."
- "The ratio of marginal performers to high quality performers increased."
- "The 'friendly courteous service' is demanded but not measured, thus no staff is provided for taking the time needed to make the public feel 'at home'."

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In contrast, 73 mid-level managers who experienced staff cuts perceived positive effects from the cuts. For example, one manager stated: "I was probably overstaffed in 1984. I have cut out most of the fat and its had a very positive effect. Everyone buckles down and does what has to be done."

Regarding the prospect of future staff reductions, about 95 percent of the 645 responding mid-level managers believed that additional cuts in fiscal year 1986 equal to the cuts in fiscal year 1985 would have a somewhat or much worse effect on the unit's ability to produce quality work. The staff cuts for 1986 and other years are discussed in chapter 5.

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### **Most Managers Say They Are Understaffed**

Addressing the then-current staffing levels in June 1986, about two-thirds of managers surveyed said their units had less (53 percent) or much less (11 percent) staff than needed, and about one-third said their staffing equaled their staff needs. To learn why most managers believed their units were understaffed, we interviewed 10 district or branch managers (selected at random) who held this view. Four managers told us that their staffing was below authorized levels and that they already filled the positions or that they were in the process of obtaining additional staff. Other managers believed that their understaffing was detrimental to the service they provided (e.g., poor phone service, long wait times, increased backlogs). In their opinion, additional staff would enable adequate service to be provided in these areas.

While some offices may be below authorized levels, that does not necessarily mean that they are understaffed in relation to the amount of work the office should be expected to handle efficiently. In a May 20, 1986 letter to SSA, we provided information showing wide variations in efficiency among field offices caused in part by staffing and workload imbalances among similar offices.

In our report Social Security: Stable Leadership and Better Management Needed to Improve Effectiveness (GAO/HRD-87-39) to be issued on March 18, 1987, we stated that SSA needs to improve its method for computing field office staff needs. SSA's method of authorizing and allocating staff, which is based on an office's historical performance, tends to perpetuate workload and staff imbalances. To reliably determine staff needs, SSA needs to know the amount of time it should take field offices to complete work, rather than relying on how long it took the offices to complete work in the past, and then apply such time to the actuarially and statistically projected workloads.



# A Case Study of 15 Field Offices With Significant Staff Reductions

In 15 field offices we visited that had experienced significant staff reductions since the beginning of fiscal year 1984, most managers and about half of the employees and AFGE representatives we interviewed said that service quality remained good. Management and employees differed concerning the adequacy of current staffing levels, but there was general agreement that additional future reductions in the offices would adversely effect service.

Our analysis of claims processing times and pending workload data for the 1984-86 period indicates a significant deterioration in service for one area—the processing times for SSI-B/D claims. The time to process these claims increased 23 days—from 74 days in 1984 to 97 days in 1986. In comparison, the processing time for these claims nationally increased only 4 days. The principal reason for the larger increase in processing time at the 15 offices is the relatively high processing times of the New York and New Jersey state disability agencies which make the medical determinations for 5 of the 15 offices we visited.

## Views of Office Staff on Staff Levels and Service

### Views on Adequacy of Current Staffing

Management and employee views on the adequacy of current staffing contrasted significantly. For example,

- 9 of 15 managers said existing staff was adequate to do the job, while
- 43 of the 50 claims and service representatives with whom we spoke and 7 of 12 AFGE representatives said that existing staff was less than adequate.

Managers cited such factors as declining workloads, systems improvements, and more experienced staff as reasons why they considered current staffing as adequate. Several managers expressed the view that their offices were previously overstaffed. One manager said:

- “Our office has kept key people and gotten rid of the dead wood. That is how we have been able to deal with staff cuts and still process the workload. The people who remain are working harder and as a team.”

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Claims and service representatives and AFGE representatives interviewed generally said they believed that existing staff was being overworked and backlogs were getting larger because current staffing was inadequate. Some specific comments follow:

- “The clericals—claims development clerks—are GS-4s who are so short staffed, they are being worked to death.”
- “. . . staffing shortages are so acute that Claims Representatives have to take turns processing social security card applications . . .”
- “Twenty percent of my time is spent doing work formerly done by clericals. We work like hell and can’t keep up this pace.”

Positions most frequently mentioned as understaffed were clericals, claims representatives, and service representatives. A manager stated that clericals are important in keeping the voluminous claims paperwork flowing. He said the position experiences frequent turnover and it is difficult to find replacements. Several personnel commented that clerical shortages require higher graded personnel to perform the clerical duties, which represents an inefficient use of resources.

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### **Views on Quality of Service**

Most managers interviewed in the 15 offices said that SSA provides good service to the public which is about the same or better than the service provided 3 years ago. Employees and AFGE representatives were generally split equally on the quality of current and past service. For example:

- Of the 15 managers, 12 said that SSA’s current service was good, and 13 said it was about the same or better than 3 years ago.
- 26 of the 50 claims and service representatives and 5 of the 12 AFGE representatives said that service was good, and 28 claims and service representatives and 6 union representatives said it was about the same or better than 3 years ago.

Pertinent comments from a manager and two employees were:

- “Service quality has improved since 1983 because of the more experienced staff.”
- “Would rate service as extremely high. Processing times are good, waiting times aren’t bad, and courtesy is OK.”
- “A special effort is made by the employees to be courteous and thorough...”

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## Views on Impact of Future Reductions

While most managers and about half of the employees and AFGE representatives said they believed current service was good, overall there was general agreement that future staff reductions in their units would adversely affect service to the public. Frequently cited service effects of additional reductions were that backlogs would get larger, processing times would increase, and interview waiting times would get longer. Regarding employee morale, many personnel interviewed said that already low morale would go lower if future reductions were imposed.

Pertinent comments were:

- "We're struggling right now. It's not easy. With reduced staff levels in the future, the office will only be able to handle the essentials."
- "Future staff loss could have a domino effect on this office's operations . . . the effects will possibly include increases in processing times and pending workloads and failure to process post-entitlement actions in a timely manner."

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## Service Deteriorated in One Aspect

Using two key service indicators—how long it takes to process each of the four types of claims (processing times) and the amount of work waiting to be processed (workloads pending)—we compared the performance of the 15 offices to (1) their performance levels 2 years earlier and (2) the performance of all offices nationally. While work pending decreased in most categories and most offices improved processing time for certain types of claims, overall the 15 offices as a group did not experience changes as favorable as those realized by all offices nationally. With certain exceptions, for most of the 15 offices when performance declined, it declined more than the national average, and when it improved, the improvement was less than the national average.

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## Processing Times

At the 15 offices, processing times were longer for SSI-B/D and DI claims and shorter for RSI and SSI-Aged claims as of September 30, 1986, compared to 2 years earlier. Table 4.1 lists and compares the processing times for initial claims for fiscal years 1984 through 1986 and the percentage change since September 30, 1984.



**Chapter 4**  
**A Case Study of 15 Field Offices With**  
**Significant Staff Reductions**

**Table 4.1: Mean Processing Times for Initial Claims for the 15 Offices Visited by GAO**

Claim type	Processing times in days				
	Fiscal year			Average 1984-86	
	1984	1985	1986	Days	Percent
RSI	22.0	21.4	20.8	-1.2	-5.5
DI	72.8	73.0	88.1	+15.3	+21.0
SSI-Aged	15.3	12.6	10.1	-5.2	-34.0
SSI-B/D	74.3	72.7	97.4	+23.1	+31.1

Appendixes IV through VII show the mean processing times, by type of claim, for each of the 15 offices we reviewed.

Comparing these processing time changes to data at the national level shows that although RSI and SSI-Aged claims processing time has improved, overall the performance of the 15 offices has been less than the national average for 3 of the types of claims processed. Table 4.2 compares the percentage change in processing times for the two groups.

**Table 4.2: Comparison of Changes in Mean Processing Times for Initial Claims—All Field Offices<sup>a</sup> vs. 15 Offices Visited**

Claim type	Processing times in days <sup>b</sup>					
	1984		1986		1984 to 1986	
	All	15	All	15	All	15
RSI	24	22	21	21	-3	-1
DI	70	73	81	88	+11	+15
SSI-Aged	12	15	10	10	-2	-5
SSI-B/D	74	74	78	97	+4	+23

<sup>a</sup>Includes the 15 offices visited

<sup>b</sup>Rounded

The table shows that with one exception, the performance in processing times for the "all field offices" group was better than that for the 15 offices. For SSI aged claims, the 15 offices decreased processing times 5 days while nationally the decrease averaged 2 days. From the standpoint of service to the public—comparing the performance of the 15 offices with that of all offices nationally—we believe the 23-day increase in processing times for SSI-B/D claims represents a significant deterioration in service.

As mentioned earlier, SSA processing time data for disability related claims includes the time the claims are with state disability agencies. To determine to what extent state agencies with long processing times were influencing the 23-day increase in processing times for SSI-B/D claims, we

excluded the times for the four offices located in New York and the one located in New Jersey. Both states historically have had long processing times; in fiscal year 1986, New York had the longest processing time with 109 days while New Jersey had the third longest time with 103 days. Excluding the 5 offices in New York and New Jersey, the claims processing time for the remaining 10 offices decreases significantly—from 97 days to 79 days, only 1 day above the national average.

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### **Pending Workloads**

Overall the amount of time required to process workload backlogs increased by 8.6 percent for the nine workloads we analyzed. To determine the change in workloads pending for these 15 offices, we compared September 30, 1983, pendings with pendings as of September 30, 1986. In making our comparison—because the unit time to process individual workloads varies—we weighted each workload by its unit time. (Unit time refers to the average amount of time used to process one item of a workload.) Because productivity varies by year and by region, we applied appropriate yearly and regional unit times to the individual workloads.

To illustrate, for the Schenectady, New York, office, for RSI claims pending, we applied a weight of 4.9 hours to the 89 claims pending at the end of fiscal year 1983, and a weight of 4.1 hours to the 76 claims pending at the end of fiscal year 1986. The difference between the products (436 and 312) yields the net change in the amount of time required to process this pending workload in this office. We performed similar analyses for the nine major workloads for all 15 offices and aggregated the results, which appear in table 4.3.

**Table 4.3: Comparison of Work on Hand for Nine Workload Categories**

Workload category	Fiscal year		Percent change, 1983-86
	1983	1986	
RSI claims	4,675	3,342	-29
RSI dependent claims	2,130	1,961	-8
DI claims	15,142	23,270	+54
SSI-Aged claims	624	250	-60
SSI-B/D claims	18,450	23,718	+29
Representative payee actions	399	453	+13
SSI/overpayments	4,637	1,514	-67
RSI and DI overpayments	1,728	1,041	-40
SSI/redeterminations	5,745	2,573	-55
<b>Total</b>	<b>53,530</b>	<b>58,122</b>	<b>+8.6</b>

The table shows that the time needed to process pending work in the 15 offices decreased for six of the nine workloads. The 8.6 percent increase was caused primarily by the relatively high volume and high weight (high unit times) of DI claims and SSI-B/D claims. Comparing the 8.6-percent increase to the change in pendings for all field offices (excluding the 15 we visited) for the same workloads shows the total number of hours required to process pending workloads decreased by 12.6 percent.

In examining the performance of the 15 individual offices, we found that 10 offices had increases in total hours of work pending. Of the other 5 offices which had decreases in total hours of work pending, 2 had decreases less than the 12.6-percent decrease nationally, and 3 had a greater decrease.

In terms of service to the public, increases in work on hand generally are indicative of increased processing times and, as can be seen, the increase in work on hand for the DI and SSI-B/D claims correspond to the increase in processing time for these claims shown on page 39.

From an operational standpoint, it appears that the 8.6-percent increase in work on hand over 3 years is relatively small. In comparison to work processed, the 8.6-percent increase represents less than 1 percent of the time it took these offices to process these nine workloads in fiscal year 1986.

# Extent of Past and Planned Staff Reductions

SSA's work-year use declined by 7,972 work-years, or about 9 percent of total work-years between fiscal years 1982 and 1986. Most of the decline occurred in fiscal years 1985 and 1986, the first 2 years of SSA's 6-year staff reduction program.

In SSA field offices—which account for over half of SSA's staff resources—staffing level changes have varied widely. Since 1984, 58 percent of field offices experienced staff losses, while 14 percent experienced no change in staffing and 28 percent had staff increases. Field office positions with the greatest proportion of staff loss are clericals and data review technicians.

In fiscal year 1987—to meet budgetary shortfalls totalling \$284 million or 7.1 percent of its budget request—SSA reduced its work-years estimate by 5,266 below the work-year ceiling approved by the Congress. While SSA has a \$160 million contingency reserve that could be used to compensate for this shortfall, SSA opted not to use it. SSA said, however, it will monitor service closely and use the reserve to increase staff resources, if necessary.

In its fiscal year 1988 budget submission, SSA is proposing a reduction of 2,454 FTE work-years for the RSI, DI, and SSI programs. Such a reduction would provide a total reduction of 10,606 FTE work-years through the first 4 years of the staff reduction program. Details on reductions of 6,400 planned beyond 1988 are not well defined as of March 5, 1987.

## A 5-Year History of SSA Staff Changes

From fiscal years 1982 to 1986, SSA's total work-year usage dropped 9 percent—from 87,197 to 79,225 work-years. Table 5.1 shows this decline, by work-year category.

**Table 5.1: SSA Work-Years by Type<sup>a</sup>**

Work-year category <sup>b</sup>	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	Percent 1982-86	Change 1984-86
FTE's	82,575	82,940	80,455	78,221	75,964	-8.0	-5.6
Overtime	2,824	3,992	4,017	2,331	1,492	-47.2	-62.9
Nonceiling	1,798	1,808	1,821	1,615	1,769	-1.6	-2.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>87,197</b>	<b>88,740</b>	<b>86,293</b>	<b>82,167</b>	<b>79,225</b>	<b>-9.1</b>	<b>-8.2</b>
Cumulative percent change	•	+1.8	-1.0	-5.8	-9.1		

<sup>a</sup>Includes all programs administered by SSA. Excludes programs transferred out of SSA during the 1982-86 period

<sup>b</sup>Full-time Equivalents (FTEs) consist of both full-time and part-time personnel whose employment is subject to ceilings set by the Office of Management and Budget and the Department of Health and Human Services. Nonceiling personnel are employees in special programs, such as stay-in-school and summer aide

The table shows the greatest loss occurred in FTE work-years, which generally declined steadily since 1982. Conversely, overtime use during the period varied significantly by year.

Staff on duty for major SSA operational components generally declined steadily between the end of fiscal year 1982 and the end of fiscal year 1986. Table 5.2 shows end-of-year staffing figures for major SSA organizational components.

**Table 5.2: Staff on Duty at End of Fiscal Year for Major SSA Components**

Component	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	Percent	
						1982-86	1984-86
SSA field offices	43,702	41,871	40,551	40,483	39,211	-10.3	-3.3
OHA hearing offices	4,870	4,949	4,534	4,352	4,283	-12.1	-5.5
PSCs <sup>a</sup>	14,390	14,563	14,154	13,495	12,279	-14.7	-13.2
OCRO <sup>b</sup>	5,310	4,888	5,091	5,642	4,642	-12.6	-8.8
ODO <sup>c</sup>	6,159	5,931	5,627	5,314	4,835	-21.5	-14.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>74,431</b>	<b>72,202</b>	<b>69,957</b>	<b>69,286</b>	<b>65,250</b>	<b>-12.3</b>	<b>-6.7</b>

<sup>a</sup>Program service centers

<sup>b</sup>Office of Central Records Operations

<sup>c</sup>Office of Disability Operations

The table shows that staffing levels of all major components declined an average of about 12 percent from fiscal year 1982 to fiscal year 1986. From fiscal year 1984 (the year before SSA's staffing reduction initiative began) to fiscal year 1986, SSA field offices experienced the lowest proportionate loss of staff (3.3 percent) while the PSCs and ODO experienced the largest reductions. The staff on duty by region for the 1982-86 period for the OHA hearings offices and the PSCs are shown in appendixes VIII and IX, respectively.

## Staff Changes in Field Offices

Table 5.3 shows end-of-year staff on duty for SSA field offices, by region, for fiscal years 1982-86.

Chapter 5  
Extent of Past and Planned Staff Reductions

**Table 5.3: Field Office Staff on Duty by Region\***

Region	End of fiscal year					Percent change	
	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1982-86	1984-86
Boston	2,065	2,033	2,057	2,020	1,891	- 8.4	- 8.1
New York	6,121	5,875	5,550	5,496	5,231	-14.5	- 5.7
Philadelphia	4,334	4,045	4,057	3,998	3,754	-13.4	- 7.5
Atlanta	7,211	6,904	6,713	6,694	6,658	- 7.7	- 0.8
Chicago	7,815	7,567	7,202	7,312	7,121	- 8.9	- 1.1
Dallas	4,490	4,360	4,300	4,363	4,186	- 6.8	- 2.7
Kansas City	2,062	1,960	1,822	1,818	1,790	-13.2	- 1.8
Denver	1,090	1,041	1,004	1,049	1,021	- 6.3	+ 1.7
San Francisco	7,048	6,694	6,528	6,362	6,211	-11.9	- 4.9
Seattle	1,466	1,392	1,318	1,371	1,348	- 8.0	+ 2.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>43,702</b>	<b>41,871</b>	<b>40,551</b>	<b>40,483</b>	<b>39,211</b>	<b>-10.3</b>	<b>- 3.3</b>

\*Excludes regional headquarters staff

Overall, table 5.3 shows that field office staffing decreased 10.3 percent for the 1982-86 period and declined 3.3 percent for the 1984-86 period. On a regional basis, the table shows that change in staff for the fiscal year 1982-86 period varied from a decrease of 6.3 percent for the Denver region to a decrease of 14.5 percent for the New York region.

To determine the change in staffing levels of individual field offices, we developed office-level staffing information for the period beginning fiscal year 1984 through the end of fiscal year 1986.

Of the 1,309 SSA field offices in continuous operation during fiscal years 1984 to 1986, 58 percent experienced a net reduction in staff as of the end of fiscal year 1986, 28 percent had a net staff gain, and staff levels in 14 percent remained unchanged. These data are based on end of fiscal year staff on duty. Table 5.4 summarizes these changes.

**Table 5.4: SSA Field Office Staff Changes\***

Offices with	Number	Percent of offices
No change in staffing	187	14
Increased staffing	366	28
Decreased staffing	756	58
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,309</b>	

\*Excludes staff in SSA's 34 teleservice centers and offices that opened or closed during the period

Of the field offices that had a net loss of staff between the start of fiscal year 1984 and the end of fiscal year 1986, 26 percent lost only one staff person. Table 5.5 shows the distribution of offices that experienced a decline in staffing by the number of net staff lost.

**Table 5.5: Distribution of Field Offices by Number of Net Staff Lost (Fiscal Years 1984-86)**

Staff Loss	Number of offices	Percent of offices
1	195	26
2	182	24
3	108	14
4	63	8
5	53	7
6	33	4
7-10	65	9
11-20	47	6
21-30	10	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>756</b>	<b>100*</b>

\*Does not add due to rounding.

In terms of the proportion of staff loss, 52 percent of the offices that lost staff experienced losses of 10 percent or less of their staff on duty at the start of fiscal year 1984. Twelve percent of offices that lost staff lost over 20 percent. Table 5.6 shows the distribution of offices that lost staff by percentage of staff loss.

**Table 5.6: Distribution of Field Offices by Percent of Net Staff Lost (Fiscal Years 1984-86)**

Percent of staff loss	Number of offices	Percent of offices
5 or less	119	16
Over 5 to 10	271	36
Over 10 to 15	161	21
Over 15 to 20	115	15
Over 20	90	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>756</b>	<b>100</b>

The change in field office staff mix for the period fiscal year 1982 to fiscal year 1986 is shown in table 5.7.

**Table 5.7: SSA Field Office Staff Composition** (Staff on Duty at End of Fiscal Year)

Type of position	Fiscal year			Percent change	
	1982	1984	1986	1982-86	1984-86
Administrative	2,172	2,172	2,125	-2.2	-2.2
Operations supervisors	2,651	2,711	2,634	-0.6	-2.8
Operations analysts	532	467	405	-23.9	-13.3
Field representatives	1,250	1,175	1,088	-13.0	-7.4
Generalist claims representatives	1,383	1,132	1,469	+6.2	+29.8
Title II claims representatives	6,794	6,368	6,333	-6.8	-0.5
Title XVI claims representatives	5,970	6,199	5,725	-4.1	-7.6
Claims representative trainees	280	119	289	+3.2	+142.9
Data review technicians	4,317	3,960	3,062	-29.1	-22.7
Service representatives	6,608	6,410	6,053	-8.4	-5.6
Clerical	7,834	5,913	5,838	-25.5	-1.3
Other clerical	2,600	2,338	2,245	-13.7	-4.0
Special employment	1,307	1,587	1,243	-4.9	-21.7
Service representative/data review technician	a	a	703	a	a
<b>Total staff on duty at end of year</b>	<b>43,698<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>40,551</b>	<b>39,212<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>-10.3</b>	<b>-3.3</b>

<sup>a</sup>Not applicable

<sup>b</sup>The differences in these totals and those in table 5.3 are due to uncorrected SSA systems input errors

Table 5.7 shows that the greatest proportionate loss of staff over the comparison period occurred among data review technicians (DRTs). This position is expected to be greatly affected by changes in claims processing resulting from the direct systems input of claims data which is to occur under the Claims Modernization Program. In anticipation of the planned elimination of the DRT position, in fiscal year 1985 SSA established a joint service representative/DRT position. As the table shows, 703 DRTs were listed in this position at the end of fiscal year 1986.

SSA field offices have also lost a significant proportion of clerical staff. Clericals on duty declined 25.5 percent from the end of fiscal year 1982 to the end of fiscal year 1986, and "other clericals" declined by 13.7 percent.

The number of generalist claims representatives on duty in SSA field offices increased from the end of fiscal year 1982 to 1986. Generalist claims representatives take applications for both RSI and SSI claims. SSA officials attributed the increase in the number of generalists to the need for increased staff flexibility, particularly in smaller offices.



## Actions Taken to Implement Fiscal Year 1987 Budget

SSA's fiscal year 1987 budget plans were significantly affected by two events—an unanticipated congressional reduction of \$171.3 million from the administration's appropriation request, and \$112.7 million in unbudgeted costs resulting partly from the recent federal pay raise and the change in the federal retirement program. Together, these events resulted in a shortfall of \$284 million, or 7.1 percent of SSA's initial appropriations request.

In its fiscal year 1987 budget submission, the administration requested just over \$4 billion for the Limitation on Administrative Expense (LAE) account,<sup>1</sup> including \$160 million for a contingency reserve to cover unanticipated workloads and other expenses. The administration estimated its total employment needs for the LAE account to be 78,580 work years, of which 73,270 were FTE work-years. The request reflected a reduction of 2,899 FTE work-years from the levels SSA expected to use in fiscal year 1986.

In separate but identical actions, the Senate and the House Appropriations Committees approved in total the over \$4 billion and 78,580 work-years requested. Both, however, expressed the view that overtime—at 4.5 percent of LAE work-years—was too high and should be reduced to 3 percent of total work-years. To achieve an overtime level of 3 percent and at the same time approve the total work-years requested, both chambers increased FTES by 1,167 to offset and equal a reduction in overtime work-years to 3 percent of total work-years. The change to SSA's fiscal year 1987 work-year mix is shown in table 5.8.

**Table 5.8: Comparison of Work-Years Requested With Work-Years Approved (Fiscal Year 1987)**

	Budget request	Congressional action
FTEs	73,270	74,437
Overtime	3,524	2,357
Nonceiling	1,786	1,786
<b>Total</b>	<b>78,580</b>	<b>78,580</b>

In conference, the Appropriations Committees reduced SSA's LAE budget \$171 million below the requested level. The conference report (99-960), dated October 2, 1986, explained the reduction as follows:

"Last month, the conferees were informed by the Social Security Administration that they expect to lapse at least \$171,000,000 in FY 1986. This results from a

<sup>1</sup>Includes the RSI, DI, and SSI programs only.

number of factors including lower outlays in their computer modernization project, lower use of overtime by Social Security field personnel and the carryover effect of overestimating requirements for FY 1985. This means that the 1986 base used by the executive branch and reviewed by the Congress in making its initial recommendation for FY 1987 was overstated. This is the basis for the reduction recommended by the conferees. This does not change any of the substantive recommendations of the House or Senate related to staffing or office closings, but merely reflects a reestimate of the amount of funding necessary to implement these recommendations. The conferees note that the contingency reserve of \$160,000,000 has not been reduced and is available if necessary."

To compensate for the \$171 million appropriations reduction, SSA made a number of budget reductions, including

- \$24 million in payroll costs resulting from lower than expected average salaries;
- \$34.3 million in FTE, nonceiling, and overtime work-year reductions;
- \$78.5 million in controllable nonsalary cost reductions; and
- \$37 million achieved by holding state disability agencies' spending at the fiscal year 1986 level.

SSA's fiscal year 1987 resources were further affected by unbudgeted costs of \$94 million resulting from the costs of the 3-percent federal pay raise, which went into effect in January 1987, and the costs of the new Federal Employees' Retirement System. A December 15, 1986, memorandum from the SSA commissioner detailed SSA's adjustments for the \$94 million in unbudgeted costs. These adjustments included

- reducing overtime work-years for January to September 1987 by two-thirds (saving \$22 million);
- reducing nonceiling work-years for January to September 1987 by two-thirds (saving \$7 million); and
- holding certain nonsalary controllable costs at 53 percent of fiscal year 1986 actual or fiscal year 1987 budgeted levels, whichever was lower (saving \$65.6 million).

The cumulative effect of the reduction in SSA's appropriation and the unbudgeted costs on fiscal year 1987 work-year resources compared to fiscal year 1986 usage is shown in table 5.9.

**Table 5.9: SSA FY 1987 Work-Year Operating Budget Compared to FY 1986 Usage and FY 1987 Appropriated Levels (LAE Only)**

Work-year category	FY 1986 usage	FY 1987 appropriation	FY 1987 operating budget	Difference: appropriation less 1987 budget
FTE	75,494	74,437	71,799	2,638
Overtime	1,487	2,357	774	1,583
Nonceiling	1,615	1,786	741	1,045
<b>Total</b>	<b>78,746</b>	<b>78,580</b>	<b>73,314</b>	<b>5,266</b>

As table 5.9 shows, SSA's work-year fiscal year 1987 resources have been significantly affected by the budgetary shortfalls. SSA's 1987 operating budget is 5,266 work-years below the level appropriated by the Congress.

SSA chose to reduce its work-year use by 5,266 rather than use contingency reserve resources to make up the unanticipated budgetary reductions. SSA officials said they plan to manage for the remainder of the fiscal year under current resource allocations, but will consider drawing on the contingency reserve if serious service deterioration problems develop.

We did not review the bases for how SSA expected to achieve the additional 5,266 work-year reduction in fiscal year 1987. On December 9, 1986, we asked SSA for work-year savings estimates for all procedural and systems changes budgeted for implementation in fiscal year 1987 but as of March 1, 1987, SSA did not provide the information requested. Additional details on fiscal year 1987 reductions were contained in the fiscal year 1988 budget justification, a copy of which was provided to us on February 18, 1987. The justification, however, does not contain the level of detail required to perform an adequate analysis.

SSA's final fiscal year 1987 work-year allocations to its major components are shown in Table 5.10.

**Table 5.10: FY 1987 Work-Year Allocations Compared to FY 1986 Use**

Component	FY 1986 use	FY 1987 allocation	Percent difference
SSA field offices <sup>a</sup>	42,022	39,333	-6.4
OHA	5,516	5,435	-1.3
Office of Central Operations <sup>b</sup>	23,694	21,061	-11.1

<sup>a</sup>Includes regional office headquarters staff

<sup>b</sup>Includes program service centers, disability operations, and central records operations

As table 5.10 shows, components of SSA's Office of Central Operations (the program service centers, Office of Disability Operations, and Office of Central Records Operations) will experience the greatest proportionate decline in work-year resources—11.1 percent. SSA's field offices will experience a 6.4-percent reduction below fiscal year 1986 usage levels.

Table 5.11 shows the change in work-years for all SSA regions for fiscal year 1987 compared to fiscal year 1986 usage, by work-year category.

**Table 5.11: FY 1987 Work-Year Allocations for SSA Field Offices Compared to FY 1986 Use**

	FY 1986 actual	FY 1987 revised	Percent change from FY 1986
FTEs	40,267	38,520	-4.4
Overtime	841	456	-45.8
Nonceiling	914	347	-60.9
<b>Total*</b>	<b>42,022</b>	<b>39,333</b>	<b>-6.4</b>

\*Includes regional office headquarters staff

As the table shows, total work-year resources available to SSA regions in fiscal year 1987 are 6.4 percent below fiscal year 1986 actual usage. Nonceiling personnel work-years will experience the greatest reduction—61 percent—while overtime work-years will decline 46 percent; FTE work-years will decline 4.4 percent.

To achieve the fiscal year 1987 reductions, SSA's fiscal year 1987 employment policy calls for

- a general freeze on hiring for staff/support positions;
- some replacement of FTE losses in field and hearings offices and OCRO;
- no replacement of "normal losses" in the program service centers and the Office of Systems, although losses in excess of normal levels may be replaced; and
- a total freeze on hiring by or transfers into ODO.

To help reach its headquarters support staff reduction goal—originally estimated at 2,000 FTES—SSA announced in January 1987 a two-phase program intended to place headquarters and other support staff who are at grades GS-12 and above in field and hearings office vacancies as they occur. The program provides for pay retention for affected employees and the costs of employee relocations.

Under the first phase of the program, eligible employees can volunteer for available field assignments, but are not required to relocate. This phase is expected to last at least through the end of fiscal year 1987. Under the second phase of the program, relocation will be mandatory. In this phase, SSA management will identify which employees it wants to reassign, and post them to field office vacancies. Employees who meet certain age and service requirements who do not want to be reassigned outside of their "commuting area" may opt for a discontinued service retirement.

## Staff Reduction Plan on Schedule

SSA's actual and budgeted FTE reduction for fiscal years 1985 through 1988—the first 4 years of the staff reduction initiative—is generally on target with the original plan. Table 5.12 compares the original FTE reductions planned for fiscal years 1985 to 1988 to the actual reductions in fiscal years 1985 and 1986 and currently budgeted for fiscal year 1987 and 1988.

**Table 5.12: Comparison of Planned and Actual FTE Reductions (LAE Only)**

	FTE reduction <sup>a</sup>	
	Original plan	Fiscal year actual
1985	1,913	2,210
1986	1,689	2,247
1987	3,079	3,695 <sup>a</sup>
1988	3,925	2,454 <sup>b</sup>
<b>Total</b>	<b>10,606</b>	<b>10,606</b>

<sup>a</sup>Operating budget as of February 15, 1987

<sup>b</sup>Fiscal year 1988 budget submission

The table shows that—assuming that the fiscal year 1987 and 1988 estimates hold—SSA's staff reduction program will be on target at the end of fiscal year 1988. The table also shows that, compared to its original plan, SSA has realized, or expects to realize, larger FTE reductions in each of the first 3 years of the program, but expects lower than planned reductions in fiscal year 1988. A number of reasons account for the differences in each year, including workloads that did not materialize, the impact of Gramm-Rudman legislation, and unanticipated budgetary cuts.

Beyond fiscal year 1988, SSA officials told us that the specifics of how SSA will achieve additional staff reductions are not yet precisely defined. They said however that SSA still expects to achieve reductions through systems modernization, increased productivity, and various procedural changes.

# Conclusions

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Overall SSA service has remained stable during the first 2 years of the staff reduction program. SSA's traditional performance measures continue to reflect improved or stable service and, for its part, the public perceives that it is receiving good service. While many SSA employees express negative views regarding staff reductions, they nevertheless generally view service as good to very good and the same or better than 3 years ago. Similarly, SSA's mid-level managers, most of who said their units had less staff than needed, nevertheless said they believed performance in their units had improved or remained stable over the last several years. In units which lost staff, most managers and employees believed the reductions had adversely affected the work of their unit; 16 percent of the managers and employees categorized the effect as significant.

We share the concern of SSA managers and employees regarding future staff reductions. Reducing an agency's staffing by about 21 percent over a 6-year period without adversely affecting service is likely to become more difficult as the reductions continue. To help ensure that realized reductions are not adversely affecting service, SSA must closely watch for early warning indicators such as increased workloads in affected offices. To help ensure that planned reductions will not adversely affect service, SSA must have a sound basis for deciding the size and type of staff needed at each location to process projected workloads.



# National Mean Processing Times for Initial Claims (Last 5 Quarters)

Figures in days <sup>a</sup>					
	December 1985	March 1986	June 1986	September 1986	December 1986
RSI <sup>b</sup>	21	21	20	21	20
DI	71	88	83	80	79
SSI-aged	11	11	10	10	11
SSI-B/D	65	84	81	80	80

<sup>a</sup>Rounded to nearest whole day

<sup>b</sup>Includes Health Insurance workloads



# Regional Mean Processing Times for Initial Claims (December 1985 and 1986 Quarters)

Figures in days*								
Region	RSI		DI		SSI-Aged		SSI-B/D	
	12/85	12/86	12/85	12/86	12/85	12/86	12/85	12/86
Boston	27	23	82	100	11	12	68	96
New York	22	21	102	124	13	11	96	125
Philadelphia	17	15	49	69	9	8	55	89
Atlanta	20	20	64	67	13	13	61	65
Chicago	18	17	76	79	8	8	62	77
Dallas	23	23	68	77	11	10	60	74
Kansas City	20	19	62	62	11	10	46	55
Denver	22	22	67	72	10	11	60	71
San Francisco	20	19	77	72	10	10	69	76
Seattle	20	18	64	74	9	12	55	81
National	21	20	71	79	11	11	65	80

\*Days rounded to nearest whole day.

# Regional Mean Processing Times for Appeals (Last 5 Quarters)

Figures in days<sup>a</sup>

Region	December 1985		March 1986		June 1986		September 1986		December 1986	
	R	H	R	H	R	H	R	H	R	H
Boston	73	143	113	166	109	151	96	151	90	170
New York	86	135	100	148	93	132	101	137	97	152
Philadelphia	42	159	65	202	66	209	64	209	58	201
Atlanta	46	139	61	166	51	158	49	157	47	170
Chicago	59	161	77	199	68	198	63	187	62	180
Dallas	49	159	70	185	58	181	56	186	51	191
Kansas City	59	155	68	171	57	168	56	176	51	168
Denver	53	162	75	176	59	190	60	172	63	169
San Francisco	66	168	69	196	65	197	63	193	67	198
Seattle	54	197	82	241	73	226	64	226	62	202
National	57	154	73	182	65	178	63	176	61	178

<sup>a</sup>Rounded up to nearest whole day

Legend: R = reconsiderations

H = hearings

# RSI Claims Mean Processing Times for 15 Offices Visited by GAO

Times in days	Fiscal year			Change 1984-86	
	1984	1985	1986	Days	Percent
<b>SSA Region 2—New York:</b>					
New Rochelle, NY	25.2	22.8	22.8	-2.4	-9.5
Jersey City, NJ	28.7	29.1	27.4	-1.3	-4.5
NYC (Brooklyn)—Bedford	27.8	23.7	27.9	+0.1	+0.4
NYC (Manhattan)—Downtown	26.0	27.7	31.1	+5.1	+19.6
Schenectady, NY	19.6	19.0	18.3	-1.3	-6.6
<b>SSA Region 3—Philadelphia:</b>					
Wilmington, DE	19.9	19.4	19.6	-0.3	-1.5
Philadelphia, PA (Kensington and Allegheny Aves.)	20.9	19.2	17.8	-3.1	-14.8
Baltimore, MD (West)	17.1	16.8	14.0	-3.1	-18.1
Altoona, PA	16.7	14.6	16.1	-0.6	-3.6
Martinsburg, WV	17.3	18.6	20.1	+2.8	+16.2
<b>SSA Region 5—Chicago:</b>					
Galesburg, IL	20.7	18.9	17.9	-2.8	-13.5
Peoria, IL	21.4	19.2	17.0	-4.4	-20.6
Detroit, MI (Conner Ave.)	29.2	25.4	26.9	-2.3	-7.9
Euclid, OH	19.1	19.2	13.8	-5.3	-27.7
Indianapolis, IN (West)	18.1	17.3	15.2	-2.9	-16.0
Overall mean time (15 offices)	22.0	21.4	20.8	-1.2	-5.5
Mean time—all offices nationally	24.1	22.4	20.8	-3.3	-13.7

# DI Claims Mean Processing Times for 15 Offices Visited by GAO

Times in days					
	Fiscal year			Change 1984-86	
	1984	1985	1986	Days	Percent
<b>SSA Region 2—New York:</b>					
New Rochelle, NY	88.2	93.3	114.5	+26.3	+29.8
Jersey City, NJ	89.7	94.8	123.0	+33.3	+37.1
NYC (Brooklyn)—Bedford	65.8	89.3	109.5	+43.7	+66.4
NYC (Manhattan)—Downtown	110.7	108.5	128.1	+17.4	+15.7
Schenectady, NY	76.5	92.1	107.5	+31.0	+40.5
<b>SSA Region 3—Philadelphia:</b>					
Wilmington, DE	63.2	62.3	70.2	+7.0	+11.1
Philadelphia, PA (Kensington and Allegheny Aves.)	38.7	32.9	40.8	+2.1	+5.4
Baltimore, MD (West)	63.1	53.7	69.9	+6.8	+10.8
Altoona, PA	52.4	53.6	72.9	+20.5	+39.1
Martinsburg, WV	59.0	49.5	71.7	+12.7	+21.5
<b>SSA Region 5—Chicago:</b>					
Galesburg, IL	66.3	79.7	79.9	+13.6	+20.5
Peoria, IL	64.2	71.6	75.3	+11.1	+17.3
Detroit, MI (Conner Ave )	71.6	66.9	74.1	+2.5	+3.5
Euclid, OH	77.4	80.7	94.2	+16.8	+21.7
Indianapolis, IN (West)	112.7	86.5	88.8	-23.9	-21.2
Overall mean time (15 offices)	72.8	73.0	88.1	+15.3	+21.0
Mean time—all offices nationally	69.7	70.1	80.7	+11.0	+15.8

# Mean Processing Times for SSI-Aged Claims for 15 Offices Visited by GAO

Times in days

	Fiscal year			Change 1984-86	
	1984	1985	1986	Days	Percent
<b>SSA Region 2—New York</b>					
New Rochelle, NY	25.0	20.9	14.2	-10.8	-43.2
Jersey City, NJ	18.8	12.7	12.9	-5.9	-31.4
NYC (Brooklyn)—Bedford	11.7	7.0	7.5	-4.2	-35.9
NYC (Manhattan)—Downtown	24.6	16.9	8.9	-15.7	-63.8
Schenectady, NY	13.1	9.9	10.9	-2.2	-16.8
<b>SSA Region 3—Philadelphia</b>					
Wilmington, DE	17.2	22.0	13.7	-3.5	-20.3
Philadelphia, PA (Kensington and Allegheny Aves.)	11.0	9.1	6.1	-4.9	-44.5
Baltimore, MD (West)	10.6	9.1	5.9	-4.7	-44.3
Altoona, PA	9.5	6.4	5.6	-3.9	-41.1
Martinsburg, WV	12.7	10.3	20.6	+7.9	+62.2
<b>SSA Region 5—Chicago</b>					
Galesburg, IL	14.7	11.4	13.3	-1.4	-9.5
Peoria, IL	14.4	8.8	7.0	-7.4	-51.4
Detroit, MI (Conner Ave.)	13.3	8.4	9.2	-4.1	-30.8
Euclid, OH	7.3	9.2	9.6	+2.3	+31.5
Indianapolis, IN (West)	11.9	15.2	7.8	-4.1	-34.5
Overall mean time (15 offices)	15.3	12.6	10.1	-5.2	-34.0
Mean time—all offices nationally	15.4	12.2	10.4	-5.0	-32.5

# Mean Processing Times for SSI-Blind/Disabled Claims for 15 Offices Visited by GAO

Times in days	Fiscal year			Change 1984-86	
	1984	1985	1986	Days	Percent
<b>SSA Region 2—New York:</b>					
New Rochelle, NY	91.1	84.0	109.2	+18.1	+19.9
Jersey City, NJ	87.4	89.0	120.2	+32.8	+37.5
NYC (Brooklyn)—Bedford	75.9	103.1	139.2	+63.3	+83.4
NYC (Manhattan)—Downtown	78.8	93.9	125.5	+46.7	+59.3
Schenectady, NY	61.7	78.2	104.5	+42.8	+69.4
<b>SSA Region 3—Philadelphia:</b>					
Wilmington, DE	86.3	65.4	71.4	-14.9	-17.3
Philadelphia, PA (Kensington and Allegheny Aves.)	54.8	56.1	98.9	+44.1	+80.5
Baltimore, MD (West)	83.2	65.8	105.1	+21.9	+26.3
Altoona, PA	53.6	52.9	87.1	+33.5	+62.5
Martinsburg, WV	60.7	41.4	75.4	+14.7	+24.2
<b>SSA Region 5—Chicago:</b>					
Galesburg, IL	51.8	59.4	68.4	+16.6	+32.0
Peoria, IL	58.8	66.7	67.2	+8.4	+14.3
Detroit, MI (Conner Ave.)	75.3	67.1	74.2	-1.1	-1.5
Euclid, OH	82.5	53.0	44.8	-37.7	-45.7
Indianapolis, IN (West)	101.4	77.9	81.7	-19.7	-19.4
Overall mean time (15 offices)	74.3	72.7	97.4	+23.1	+31.1
Mean time—all offices nationally	71.4	65.3	78.0	+6.6	+9.2

# Office of Hearings and Appeals Staff on Duty by Region

Region	End of fiscal year					Percent change	
	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1982-86	1984-86
Boston	226	227	187	185	182	-19.5	- 2.7
New York	764	734	652	625	579	-24.2	-11.2
Philadelphia	519	532	484	465	439	-15.4	- 9.3
Atlanta	988	990	954	916	898	- 9.1	- 5.9
Chicago	812	870	792	760	776	- 4.4	- 2.0
Dallas	521	521	482	465	463	-11.1	- 3.9
Kansas City	193	197	183	174	170	-11.9	- 7.1
Denver	108	112	103	99	101	- 6.5	- 1.9
San Francisco	609	642	575	548	539	-11.5	- 6.3
Seattle	130	124	122	115	136	+ 4.6	+11.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,870</b>	<b>4,949</b>	<b>4,534</b>	<b>4,352</b>	<b>4,283</b>	<b>-12.1</b>	<b>- 5.5</b>

Note: Figures reflect regional chief administrative law judge and regional hearings office staffing only.

# Program Service Center Staff on Duty

PSC	End of fiscal year					Percent change	
	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1982-86	1984-86
North Eastern	2,299	2,367	2,244	2,103	1,850	-19.5	-17.6
Mid-Atlantic	1,977	1,986	2,010	1,929	1,794	-09.3	-10.7
South Eastern	2,433	2,406	2,317	2,228	2,071	-14.9	-10.6
Great Lakes	2,620	2,600	2,545	2,457	2,243	-14.4	-11.9
Middle America	2,730	2,766	2,695	2,590	2,365	-13.4	-12.2
Western	1,772	1,863	1,725	1,600	1,417	-20.0	-17.9
International	559	575	618	588	539	-3.6	-12.8
<b>Total*</b>	<b>14,390</b>	<b>14,563</b>	<b>14,154</b>	<b>13,495</b>	<b>12,279</b>	<b>-14.7</b>	<b>-13.2</b>

\*Excludes central office support staff



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