

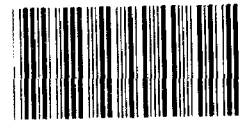
GAO

Briefing Report to Congressional Requesters

June 1987

SOCIAL SECURITY

Staff Reductions and Service Quality



133564



Human Resources Division

B-226484

June 2, 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 briefing report is the second of three reports you requested on staff reductions and service quality at the Social Security Administration (SSA). The final report will be forwarded to you later this year.

In most cases, SSA's key performance indicators show stable or improved performance. For example, pending workloads for disability claims are down 18 percent, processing times for initial claims are virtually unchanged, and Supplemental Security Income process accuracy is slightly higher.

In other cases, there appear to be temporary or seasonal declines in SSA performance. For example, due to a significant increase in requests for hearings, the pending hearings workload increased 24 percent and the average processing time for hearings increased from 176 to 196 days. At the same time, staffing in the Office of Hearings and Appeals declined by 2.8 percent from September 1986 through March 1987. (Additional details on the changes in SSA key performance indicators are presented in app. I.)

SSA officials said they have set a goal to reduce hearing processing times and backlogs in fiscal year 1988. Further, the officials said they believe the goal can be achieved through productivity increases, and that sufficient flexibility exists in the proposed fiscal year 1988 budget to supplement hearing staff resources, if necessary.

Overall, SSA has reduced its staff by 3 percent in the first half of fiscal year 1987, with field offices taking the largest reduction at about 5 percent. Additional details on SSA staff reductions during the first 6 months of fiscal year 1987 are presented in appendix II.

To prepare this report, we obtained the most current performance and staffing data from SSA and compared them with earlier data. We did not validate these data, although we did examine the integrity of certain data as part of our first report to you, Social Security: Staff Reductions and Service Quality (GAO/HRD-87-66, Mar. 10, 1987). For example, in that report, we pointed out that SSA field office wait time data was understated due in part to some field office managers artificially reducing wait time by changing office procedures when wait times were measured. SSA officials told us that the importance of reporting wait times that are representative of normal practices would be emphasized to field offices. As of May 29, 1987, however, SSA had not done so.

For our third report, we are expanding our efforts to examine the integrity of SSA performance data. For that report, we plan to focus on the substance of union allegations that SSA service is deteriorating and, in particular, that SSA performance data are being manipulated.

We did not obtain written comments from SSA; however, we discussed the contents of the report with SSA officials and incorporated their comments where appropriate. As arranged with your offices, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this briefing report until 30 days from its issue date. At that time, we will send copies to other congressional committees and members; the Secretary of Health and Human Services; the Director, Office of Management and Budget; the SSA Commissioner; and other interested parties. We will also make copies available to others upon request.

Should you want to discuss the contents of this report, please call me at 275-6193.

Sincerely yours,



Joseph F. Delfico
Senior Associate Director

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ABBREVIATIONS

B/D	blind and disabled
DI	Disability Insurance
GAO	General Accounting Office
RSI	Retirement and Survivors Insurance
SSA	Social Security Administration
SSI	Supplemental Security Income