

GAO

Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on  
Federal Services, Post Office and Civil  
Service, Committee on Governmental  
Affairs, U.S. Senate

September 1988

# SOCIAL SECURITY

## Decision to Implement Nationwide 800 Telephone Service



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United States  
General Accounting Office  
Washington, D.C. 20548

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Human Resources Division

B-223771

September 21, 1988

The Honorable David Pryor  
Chairman, Subcommittee on Federal Services,  
Post Office and Civil Service  
Committee on Governmental Affairs  
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This report responds to your May 25, 1988, request that we examine the Social Security Administration's (SSA's) decision to implement a nationwide toll-free 800 number starting on October 1, 1988. Specifically, you asked us to examine such matters as the analyses supporting the decision, alternatives considered, costs and benefits, and testing and evaluation plans. Although you also asked us to determine the decision's impact on SSA staff, we agreed with your office not to include information on this issue in this report because SSA has not yet finalized its specific staffing plans.

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## Results in Brief

SSA considered a number of alternatives for improving its phone service besides the national 800 system. Considering SSA's objectives for improving service, and the shortcomings of its current phone system, its decision to implement 800 service appears to be reasonable. Improving phone service using the 800 system will cost \$34 million per year more than the current service but \$19 million less than improving service using the current system.

Implementing 800 service on October 1, 1988, however, poses some risk that service and efficiency might be less than planned, at least temporarily. Specifically, phone service demand may exceed phone answering capabilities, creating excessive busy signals. Also, demands that toll-free service places on SSA's computers could result in reduced operating efficiency and affect the timeliness of service. SSA is developing contingency plans for these events, which it believes will help mitigate these problems should they materialize.

In examining the reasonableness of SSA's decision, we examined available documentation and analyses supporting the decision and SSA's actions and plans to implement 800 service. Also, we supplemented our review with discussions with key SSA staff and management where appropriate. Additional details on our objectives, scope, and methodology are discussed in appendix I.

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## Options Considered for Service Improvements

SSA considered a number of alternatives for improving its phone service before deciding on national 800 service. SSA's major objective in considering alternatives to its current system was to improve service. SSA wanted to

- ensure all calls would be toll-free (about 10 percent of the population now must pay a toll),
- improve accessibility through fewer busy signals (GAO tests and other data showed many facilities do not meet current SSA standards),
- improve controls over and management of the phone workload (call data for many of SSA's offices is limited), and
- encourage the public to do business by phone by facilitating access and offering extended hours for personal service and round-the-clock accessibility (SSA offices now take calls during normal business hours only).

One option considered but rejected was to expand toll-free service to the 10 percent of the population that currently has to pay a toll charge to call SSA. Under one scenario, the cost to do such would be an additional \$4 million per year and for another scenario, \$13.5 million. According to SSA, these options were rejected because they failed to address the other problems of the current system. Another option considered was establishing a national teleservice center (TSC). This option was ruled out because of the adverse impact that it likely would have on SSA employees and the logistical problems that such a move would create. Many employees in these facilities most likely would not choose to relocate to a national TSC if it involved moving from their local area and consequently would face loss of a job. Costs would also be incurred in relocating staff and equipment from current facilities.

While other options could have achieved many of the improvements SSA sought, only one—a national 800 system—provided the benefits of a single number. SSA believed that one easy-to-remember number, used in all advertising media and publications, would enable SSA to simplify the public's reaching it by phone. This advantage, when coupled with the other benefits an 800 network would provide compared to the current system, resulted in SSA's selecting the single 800 number option. SSA did not determine what an optimum configuration would be for the 800 system, that is, the number and location of answering sites. It decided to implement the system primarily using its existing TSC structure, to minimize the effects of relocating staff and to realize economies of scale by reducing the number of answering facilities. Currently 694 different facilities answer phones for the agency.

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Additional information on the alternatives considered by SSA and key events related to its decision to implement 800 service are presented in appendix II.

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## Costs for 800 Service

Though the 800 system is designed to address shortcomings of the present system, these improvements will cost about 50 percent more. The new 800 system will cost SSA about \$104 million per year compared to the \$70 million that is estimated for the fiscal year 1988 cost for the present phone service delivery structure. The increased cost of \$34 million is attributed primarily to an increased cost of about \$16.7 million for line service (access to and use of 800 telecommunication lines) and about \$18.3 million for increased staffing, offset by a small decrease in equipment costs. The increase in line service cost is caused by the higher cost of 800 service compared to local phone lines, which currently handle about 58 percent of SSA's calls. The increase in staffing (from about 2,300 to about 3,000) is needed to improve the level of service, for example, fewer busy signals and less wait time on hold.

While the new 800 service is expected to cost more, it is expected to be more efficient than the current system. To improve current service to the level achieved by the 800 system would cost about \$123 million, \$19 million more than the projected cost of 800 service. The primary reason for this difference is the savings realized from consolidating staff from the present 694 answering sites to the 37 sites planned for the 800 system. SSA estimates that—under its current structure—about 4,200 teleservice representatives (TSRs) would be needed to provide service comparable to that planned under the 800 system, which is about 1,200 more staff than the 800 system will need.

Appendix III compares in detail the features of SSA's present phone structure with those of the proposed 800 system.

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## National 800 Service by October 1, 1988

While SSA has planned extensively for implementing this project, given its magnitude and complexity, it is unlikely that everything will go according to plan on October 1.

One concern that has surfaced in our review of SSA plans and in discussions with SSA staff is the possibility that the number of incoming calls on October 1 will greatly exceed SSA's capability to answer them. On that date SSA plans to have incoming calls from 60 percent of the country handled over the 800 system. These include calls from the 50 percent of

the population that are in geographical areas currently served by the TSCs and the 10 percent that currently are located in areas that require a toll call to reach SSA.

To provide service to this 60 percent of the country, SSA is staffing its TSCs accordingly. As additional trained staff become available during fiscal year 1989, calls from the remaining 40 percent of the country will be directed to 800 service while the local service is phased out. SSA's goal is to provide 800 service to the entire country by September 30, 1989.

However, on October 1, 1988, an individual can pick up a phone, dial the 800 number, and call SSA from any location in this country even though SSA will not be staffed to serve the entire country.

To restrict access to the 800 number—to avoid being overwhelmed by calls in excess of its capabilities—SSA plans to carefully promote and advertise the availability of the number. We believe restrictions of access will be difficult to accomplish. Once the availability of 800 service is known, there will be no practical way to prevent the media and national advocacy groups from disseminating information on the number. SSA agrees that national interest groups could publicize the 800 number prematurely. Consequently, SSA plans to meet with such groups to explain why the agency needs phased-in, selectively targeted publicity and to convince them to delay their efforts until the appropriate time.

SSA's recent experience with the introduction of its new Personalized Earnings and Benefit Estimate Statement illustrates a worst-case scenario of demand exceeding telephone capacity. On August 4, 1988, at a press conference in Washington, SSA announced the availability of the new statement, which provides—by year—up-to-date information on an individual's social security covered earnings, taxes paid, and an estimate of monthly benefits should the individual retire, die, or become disabled.

To obtain a form for requesting a statement, individuals were told to call an 800 number that originally was established to handle inquiries generated by an SSA public information campaign on the nature of social security benefits. This campaign has generated about 9,000 calls per week.

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On August 5, 1988—1 day after the press conference—by 11:00 a.m. there were over one-half million busy signals recorded and, within several days, phone companies began blocking most calls to the 800 number to prevent overload of their lines. Because of this blocking, the actual number of calls attempted is unknown. Through August 12, 1988, an average of 155,000 calls reached SSA daily. About 70 percent received busy signals.

To prevent a deterioration of service should incoming calls exceed planned call volume, SSA plans to staff the 800 number on October 1, 1988, to be able to handle 64 percent of the country, or 4 percent in excess of anticipated workloads. Also, SSA plans to train 175 employees, who normally process benefit applications at the facility where one of the TSCs is located, to answer the phones should the need arise; this will provide capability to handle an additional 5 percent of the population. Further, SSA will have the capability to redirect calls from 12 states (6 percent of the population). Individuals calling the 800 number from these states would receive a recorded message that the 800 number is not yet operational in their area and be given the local number or instructions to consult their phone directory.

SSA acknowledges that there are risks with the phased-in approach to 800 service, but also states there are drawbacks to having the entire country converted to 800 service at the same time. SSA officials said that its phase-in strategy will minimize the adverse impact on staff in its facilities that will no longer handle incoming calls once the TSCs are staffed to handle all calls. They also said that the phased approach enables them to acquire experience with the new system before final staffing decisions are made. Finally, if TSCs were staffed to handle all potential traffic while callers could still call other facilities, SSA said that many TSRS would be idle until the conversion to 800 service was made.

Another risk posed by the October 1 start date involves the thoroughness of software development and testing and the additional demands the new software will have on computer capacity. SSA is developing software that TSRS will use to (1) respond to those desiring to file claims, (2) provide referral information, and (3) schedule an appointment at a local field office.

SSA has concluded that its software should be complete and adequately tested by October 1, 1988, and that its computer capacity will be able to handle the additional traffic. SSA's software testing, although on schedule, is not yet complete and could be delayed if unanticipated problems

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occur. Likewise, SSA considers its estimates of the effect of the new software on computer capacity to be rough estimates. SSA has developed contingency plans that it believes would preclude any significant adverse effects on service should software or computer capacity problems develop.

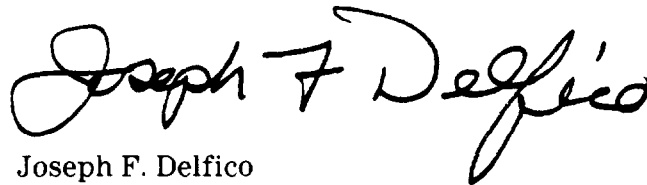
As a final contingency, SSA said it would be ready to delay the start date for its publicity efforts, if events warrant.

Additional information on SSA's planning for the implementation of national 800 service (including testing and evaluation plans) is presented in appendix IV.

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As you requested, we did not obtain written comments from SSA on a draft of this report because to do so would have delayed its issuance; however, we discussed its contents with SSA officials and incorporated their comments where appropriate. As arranged with your office, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 5 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 Commissioner of SSA; and interested parties. We will also make copies available to others upon request.

Sincerely yours,



Joseph F. Delfico  
Senior Associate Director





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**Abbreviations**

DCMA	Deputy Commissioner for Management and Assessment
DCO	Deputy Commissioner for Operations
FO	field office
GAO	General Accounting Office
SSA	Social Security Administration
TSC	teleservice center
TSR	teleservice representative

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# Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

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Our basic objective was to determine if the Social Security Administration's (SSA's) decision to implement nationwide 800 service by October 1, 1988, is reasonable. In addressing this objective, we sought to determine if SSA (1) considered alternatives and their costs and benefits before deciding on the 800 system, (2) considered the impact of 800 service on its computer operations and staffing, and (3) established plans for testing and evaluating the new system. We did not attempt to assess whether the 37 answering sites SSA will use in providing 800 service represent the most cost-efficient configuration for delivering service.

To accomplish our objective, we examined studies by internal work groups, position papers on options for improving phone service, memoranda of decisions, and various implementation plans. We also supplemented our review of documentation with discussions with key SSA staff and management.

Our review was made in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards except that we did not verify the accuracy of SSA cost data or the estimated impact the new service will have on SSA's computers. Our review was made in June and July 1988.

# Deciding on 800 Service—Other Options and Key Events

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SSA considered ways to improve its phone service for more than 1 year. The following presents options and other matters considered by SSA that are in addition to the alternatives discussed on page 2 and a chronology of key events related to SSA's decision to implement 800 service.

An alternative considered was to pilot 800 service in the western part of the country. The proposed test would have combined 800 service with teleservice center (TSC) capability to answer local calls. Currently, about 24 percent of all calls received by SSA go to TSCs over local phone lines, which are much cheaper than using 800 lines. SSA said this option was rejected because eventually combining local and 800 service would provide limited flexibility in managing phone workloads because local lines and the 800 service could not help handle each other's traffic. Also, it would reduce SSA's planned management information capability because the total volume and accessibility of all calls to the TSCs would not be automatically compiled and might not be available if the local systems could not generate the same data as the 800 system, a situation that exists in some areas.

In considering alternatives, SSA decided that the additional cost of the 800 line service would not justify taking the necessary information from callers to enable them to file a claim for benefits over the 800 system. SSA encourages individuals to use the phone to file their claims if it is more convenient. However because the time it takes to file a claim is several times longer than the average incoming call, and line charges are based on the duration of the call, SSA will not take claims over the 800 system. SSA estimated the average incoming call not involving a claim takes about 200 seconds. Handling a claim over the phone can take 30 minutes or longer. Persons calling who indicate they would like to file a claim over the phone will be offered an appointment and then be called by a claims representative in a local office. SSA says this procedure will allow the applicant to have ready all the information necessary to file the claim. Although taking claims over the 800 system would not be cost-effective now, SSA believes it might be in the future. SSA said it expects the cost of 800 service to decrease in the future because of technological advancements and increased competition.

Table II.1 presents a chronology of key events related to SSA's decision to implement national 800 service.

**Appendix II  
Deciding on 800 Service—Other Options and  
Key Events**

**Table II.1: Chronology of Key Events**

7/86	An SSA teleservice work group reports on the advantages and disadvantages of centralizing or maintaining a decentralized teleservice network.
8/86	GAO report describes SSA's decentralized phone system and four types of answering facilities. Report cites absence of good management information regarding phone service, wide variation in service among facilities called during nationwide test, and absence of toll-free service for portion of population.
1/87	The Commissioner asks for a paper discussing the cost of a national TSC accessible by an 800 number.
3/87	The Commissioner decides to defer expanding toll-free service until SSA has a clearer idea of how to best provide such service to the public. Expansion was recommended earlier by the Deputy Commissioner for Management and Assessment (DCMA).
4/87	The DCMA submits a paper discussing the cost of establishing a 1-, 2-, 3-, or 10-site national TSC. The paper also discussed expanding toll-free service under the current system.
4/87	The Deputy Commissioner for Operations (DCO) submits a paper suggesting broad objectives for national teleservice. The paper suggests establishing a national 800 number providing teleservice from an integrated network of facilities at several locations.
6/87	The SSA Senior Executive Officer, after reviewing various teleservice proposal papers, recommends establishing a single national 800 toll-free number. The Commissioner requests an in-depth analysis of how 800 service could be provided by 10/1/87.
8/87	The Commissioner receives a joint DCMA/DCO paper that discusses options and recommends expanding the current toll-free system by accepting collect calls from toll areas and conducting a pilot test of an 800 number system for long-term planning purposes. The Commissioner decides to implement an 800 system and requests a study of how to establish a national 800 number as soon as possible.
10/87	A national 800 number implementation work group is formed to study technical, policy, and staffing issues.
11/87	The national 800 number work group presents the Commissioner an implementation plan for the initiative.
1/88	The Commissioner decides to implement a national 800 number by October 1, 1988.
5/88	SSA awards a contract for a national 800 number.

# Comparison of 800 System and Current Phone Service

We believe the proposed nationwide 800 system has significant advantages over the present structure. In particular, the new system is designed to provide better service, be more efficient, and enhance SSA's ability to effectively manage its phone service workload.

## Current Structure

SSA currently provides telephone service to the public—generally toll free—8 hours per day, 5 days per week. To provide this service, SSA has a number of organizational arrangements, which are summarized in table III.1.

**Table III.1: SSA Facilities Providing Telephone Service to the Public**

Facility type	No.	Area served	Percent of population
TSCs	34	Major metropolitan area or entire state	50.0
Mini-TSCs	20	Area within state	6.5
Statewide units	10	Entire state	5.5
District or branch office	630	Local office geographical area	38.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>694</b>		<b>100.0</b>

Nationwide, the 34 TSCs—SSA's primary telephone service facilities—serve major metropolitan areas or entire states and are a distinct organizational entity. TSCs were designed to relieve SSA's district and branch offices of the burden of answering general or routine telephone inquiries and to free field personnel to handle walk-in traffic and adjudicate claims. Unlike SSA local offices, TSCs have a single mission—to provide telephone service.

SSA has 30 other central answering units, generally smaller, that also are dedicated primarily to answering telephone inquiries from the public to relieve local offices of this responsibility. Ten are commonly referred to as statewide answering units; as their name suggests, their service areas are generally statewide (one unit serves 3 states). They generally serve the less populous states. The service areas of the 20 mini-TSCs are less than statewide. Like local offices, statewide units and mini-TSCs are under the jurisdiction of an SSA district manager.

Finally, district and branch offices (local offices) outside the service area of a TSC, mini-TSC, or statewide unit provide their own telephone service along with handling walk-in traffic. Of SSA's more than 1,300

local offices, 630 have this dual role. Depending on where callers are located, their calls go to either a local office or a central answering unit.

Management information on the performance of the current system is limited. There is virtually no information on the number of calls or quality of phone service at local offices. While TSCs have systems that generate management information, the type and quality of information they provide varies greatly. Further, none of the TSCs can determine the actual number of callers that receive busy signals—a basic indicator of phone service quality.

Our past and recent reviews of SSA's phone service showed that accessibility to some facilities does not meet SSA standards and that accessibility varies widely among answering facilities. Our May 1988 test of SSA telephone accessibility (which was discussed in a recently issued report)<sup>1</sup> showed that 29 percent of all test calls experienced "difficult" access, that is, lines were busy, went unanswered or were disconnected, or callers were placed on hold for 2 minutes or longer (the average length of time callers were placed on hold was 125 seconds). This difficult access rate represents an increase of about 2 percentage points from the 27-percent rate we experienced in our May 1985 test.<sup>2</sup>

Our May 1988 test experienced busy signal rates of 15 percent or more at 11 of the 34 TSCs, while only 4 TSCs had this busy signal rate in May 1985. Our May 1988 and May 1985 tests also showed that accessibility to individual TSCs by phone varied greatly. For example, in May 1988, the difficult access rate ranged from 2.3 percent at the Houston TSC to 93.3 percent at the Lodi, New Jersey, TSC. The Lodi TSC manager attributed the poor access rate to not having enough teleservice representatives (TSRs) for the number of incoming lines, poorly performing telephone lines, and slow service response to requested maintenance and repair needs.

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## Nationwide 800 Service

The national 800 service, which will be toll free, is to become operational on October 1, 1988. At that time, all persons, no matter where located and including those in areas that currently do not have toll-free

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<sup>1</sup>Social Security: Little Overall Change in Telephone Accessibility Between 1985 and 1988 (GAO/HRD-88-129, Sept. 15, 1988).

<sup>2</sup>Social Security: Improved Telephone Accessibility Would Better Serve the Public (GAO/HRD-86-85, Aug. 19, 1986).



service, will be able to access the 800 number. Calls placed to the current numbers of the 34 TSCs will receive a message advising of the new SSA 800 number. Calls placed to SSA's other central answering units and the 630 offices that handle incoming calls will continue to be answered by those facilities. By September 30, 1989, SSA plans to have all calls placed by the public to these facilities handled by the 800 system.

When the national 800 service is fully implemented, SSA's phone answering capabilities will be consolidated at 37 answering sites—a significant decrease in the 694 locations now providing service. The 37 sites will consist of the 34 existing TSCs, 2 new TSCs for Puerto Rico and Hawaii, and an answering unit at SSA's Southeastern Program Service Center in Birmingham, Alabama. SSA chose to retain the TSCs and phase out other central answering units because the TSCs are its major answering facilities and because it believed staff at the other central units could more readily be absorbed into nearby local offices or a TSC.

The TSCs are not intended to handle all incoming calls as of October 1, 1988. SSA plans to selectively advertise and promote the 800 number until it is staffed to handle all calls to the 800 system (see pp. 19-20).

Service enhancements include expanded personalized service hours and an after-hours message recording capability. Callers will be able to receive personalized service—talk directly with TSRs—from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., nationwide, 5 days per week. From 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. (and 24 hours per day on weekends), callers with rotary dial telephones (about 45 percent of households) can leave their name, number, and the purpose of the call, and an SSA representative will call them back the next business day. Callers with "touch tone" telephones also will be able to use the system's recording capabilities to complete simple transactions, such as a change of address.

In determining staffing and other requirements for the new system, SSA decided to establish higher standards of accessibility than it has currently. It will strive for an average busy signal rate of 5 percent or less, no more than 50 percent of the calls placed on hold, and the maximum average wait time on hold not to exceed 60 seconds. Currently, SSA does not have any service standards for phone service provided by district and branch offices, mini-TSCs, or statewide answering units. For TSCs, a busy signal rate of 15 percent or less and an average on-hold time of 119 seconds or less represent acceptable service. Consequently, meeting the new standards requires more staff than was needed to meet the current standards.

An enhancement of the new system is that it will give SSA the information and capability to better manage its phone service workload, which approximates 50 million calls per year. The vendor providing the 800 service will routinely submit to SSA, by answering site, the number of calls received and answered, the number of calls placed to SSA and the number of busy signals, by originating area code, by day, by hour of the day, and the average length of calls. This will enable SSA to track performance against its established standards. Further, this information, coupled with the system's capability to reroute calls between facilities, will enable SSA to transfer incoming calls in excess of a facility's capacity to a facility with unused capacity. Consequently, use of the call routing feature should result in fewer busy signals and help reduce the variance in the levels of service provided by SSA.

The 800 system will also facilitate the public's "ease of reference" to SSA by allowing SSA to print the single 800 number on all its publications and correspondence and use it in all its media and other public information activities.

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## **Cost Comparison of the Two Systems**

The 800 number system will cost more than SSA's current structure for providing service but is designed to provide better service and be more efficient than trying to improve the current structure, data developed by SSA show. Table III.2 compares the cost of providing service under the current structure (with current service levels) to the cost of providing improved service using the current structure and the new 800 system. Improved service includes better accessibility in terms of fewer busy signals and less wait time on hold and 100 percent toll-free service.

**Appendix III  
Comparison of 800 System and Current  
Phone Service**

**Table III.2: Cost Comparison—  
Estimated Annual Telephone Costs  
(For General Inquiry Calls)**

Dollars in millions					
<b>Current structure, current service</b>		<b>Current structure, improved service</b>		<b>800 number system, improved service</b>	
<b>Equipment:</b>					
34 TSCs	\$1.5	34 TSCs	\$3.0	37 TSCs	3.3
660 FOs <sup>a</sup>	2.4	660 FOs	3.0		
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>3.9</b>		<b>6.0</b>		<b>3.3</b>
<b>Line service:</b>					
Local	1.0	Local	1.3	Local	0 <sup>b</sup>
Toll-free	8.3	Toll-free	12.3	Toll-free	26.0
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>9.3</b>		<b>13.6</b>		<b>26.0</b>
<b>Staffing (TSRs):</b>					
34 TSCs	31.5	34 TSCs	37.6	37 TSCs	74.7
660 FOs	24.9	660 FOs	65.8	660 FOs	0 <sup>b</sup>
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>56.4</b>		<b>103.4</b>		<b>74.7</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$69.6</b>		<b>\$123.0</b>		<b>\$104.0</b>

<sup>a</sup>Field offices.

<sup>b</sup>Field offices will still have phone lines, primarily for making outgoing calls.

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# Planning for Implementation of 800 Service

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In early 1988, SSA started to plan for the implementation of its national 800 service by October 1, 1988. To manage the project, the Commissioner appointed a project director. Also, an activity tracking system was set up to monitor progress, milestones were established, and 24 activities and about 80 individual tasks were identified and tracked. A work group—composed of individuals representing all affected SSA organizational components—was established and met regularly. Also, the documentation we reviewed disclosed considerable evidence of involvement of top SSA management, including the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioners.

The following discusses in detail three key activities tracked by SSA.

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## Impact on Computer Systems

Toll-free service will create an increased demand on SSA's computer systems and require the development of new software. In addition to the TSC's routine workload—which requires access to information on benefits, Medicare eligibility, earnings, etc.—the 800 service will require SSA's computers to support three new functions. The new capabilities will allow TSRS to (1) make an appointment for the caller and notify the appropriate SSA field office, (2) direct claims referrals from the TSC to the appropriate field office, and (3) provide addresses and telephone numbers for non-SSA services or agencies in the caller's local area. SSA predicts that, when service begins in October, it will receive about 13,000 calls per day requiring the use of one of these three functions.

A technical challenge that SSA faces in initiating the 800 number service is managing the impact on the agency's computer capacity—capacity that has been stressed by recent and planned modernization initiatives. SSA studies, which are based on rough estimates of capacity needs, predict that on October 1, toll-free service will consume about 4 percent of total available capacity at peak service times, with the workload for the three new functions requiring 2.7 percent of the total.

While the increased demand on capacity presents a risk of degrading computer operations (that is, slowing response time during peak operating periods), SSA has been pursuing several actions to preclude capacity shortfalls. These actions include (1) reducing workload (transactions) that must be processed by the computers, (2) improving the processing performance of software applications, (3) delaying implementation of new software until sufficient computer capacity is available, and (4) making engineering modifications to improve the capacity of existing computers. This latter category, for example, is expected to provide SSA

with an approximate 20-percent increase in capacity by the end of 1988 and will reduce the risks of capacity shortages presented by toll-free service and other upcoming initiatives.

In addition, although SSA indicates that the new toll-free service should have little impact on its computer capacity, it anticipates being able to transfer some of its less time-critical daily batch processing computer operations to the evening hours in the event that its projections are underestimated. SSA's studies estimate that batch operations currently use about 20 percent of the agency's computer capacity during peak service hours.

A second concern deals with the shortened period available to develop and test the three software functions that will be used by the TSCs. To implement toll-free service by October 1, 1988, SSA had to compress its normal software release schedules and to deviate from its software development standards. Software testing, for example, was to be completed in about 1 month—a relatively short time for completing all the phases of testing the agency considers desirable.

As a result of the short time frame between software testing and implementation, remedies for any procedural or training difficulties that surface during software testing will not be incorporated in a final procedures manual for TSC use on October 1. SSA intends to handle significant clarifications separately until the procedures manual can be rewritten and distributed.

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## Staffing

Staffing for the TSCs will increase significantly with the implementation of nationwide 800 service. As of March 31, 1988 (pre-800 service), the number of TSRs on duty was about 1,266; by October 1, 1988, the number will be 1,941, which includes staff for the new Puerto Rico and Hawaii TSCs and the TSR staff on duty at the Southeastern Program Service Center. Also, by October 1, 175 employees who process benefit applications in the service center will be trained as TSRs and serve as backup during peak periods should the need arise. When 800 service is fully implemented, the number of TSR staff on duty is currently estimated to be about 3,000, excluding the 175 employees who process benefit applications.

Staffing for the 800 initiative will come mainly from three sources—new hires, promotions, and lateral reassignments. Agency-wide, some of the 250 staff from statewide answering units and mini-TSCs being

phased out may go to TSCs while others go to local or area offices. An undetermined amount of staff savings will also be realized from local field offices that will no longer handle incoming calls once the 800 service is on line.

SSA has stated that there will be no reduction-in-force (terminations) or loss of grade as a result of 800 service and that it will use involuntary reassignments only as a last resort. To avoid involuntary reassignments, the agency has a number of options. For example, it can place a hiring freeze on the local offices that have more staff than needed until they reach desired staffing levels through attrition.

As of August 15, 1988, SSA had not decided at which TSC sites it will place the TSRS that are to come on board after October 1, 1988. We will be reporting later on how and where SSA staff will be affected and SSA's plans to manage the transition.

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## Promotion of 800 Service

SSA plans to promote the 800 number initially through local efforts by SSA field office management in the areas where the service will be first available, and to expand promotion as more areas come under the 800 number service. In this way, SSA hopes to control dissemination of information about the 800 number to prevent overload of the system and consequent deterioration in service.

SSA plans to send a public information package concerning the 800 number system to its field office managers, who will be responsible for identifying those areas currently served by a TSC or lacking toll-free service. The managers will contact local radio and television stations and newspapers serving the targeted audiences to solicit news coverage or donation of public service time to announce the 800 number's availability. (SSA routinely uses its field office structure to disseminate information about program or operational changes.) Regional commissioners, assisted by regional external affairs officers experienced in directing media campaigns, will be responsible for overseeing publicity efforts in their regions. Daily status reports will be made to SSA headquarters.

SSA also plans to begin printing the 800 number in its brochures and pamphlets as it replaces existing stocks of these materials and include the 800 number in its national promotional effort being conducted by the Advertising Council. Finally, SSA plans to contact and advise national interest groups, such as the American Association of Retired Persons, when they can inform their membership about the 800 number.

SSA's efforts to control the dissemination of information about the 800 number will be critical to the initial success of the initiative, yet they could be difficult to realize. For example, SSA will need to rely on national interest groups and the media not to publish or broadcast information about the 800 number before SSA is ready to handle the full national workload.

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## Testing and Evaluation

SSA's contract calls for 10 days of testing before the government formally accepts the 800 service. This effort will test all of the equipment, services, features, and functions of the system. The vendor is to turn the system over to SSA on September 16, 1988, about 2 weeks before the planned implementation date.

After initiating the 800 service, SSA will continue its practice of conducting TSR "service observations" in which supervisors routinely evaluate service by listening to a sample of phone calls. Also, using regional quality assurance personnel, SSA plans to evaluate the quality of service in a special study through direct testing and through contacts with people who have used it from October through December 1988. Direct testing will include making random calls to the 800 number to test courtesy and the accuracy of information provided by the TSRS. The public contacts will inquire about the users' satisfaction with the system and their comprehension of the information provided by SSA. The nature of future studies in 1989 will depend on the results of the special study.

As mentioned earlier, the 800 number system will provide extensive ongoing information on such matters as the volume of calls and busy signals. These data will provide immediate feedback on system performance.









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