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**Social Security Administration--
The First 6 Months of 800 Phone
Service**

Statement of
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Before the
Special Committee on Aging
United States Senate

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to present our observations on the performance of the Social Security Administration's (SSA's) 800 phone service for the first 6 months of its operation.

SSA's 800 system became operational on October 1, 1988, and provided access to the 800 number to everyone in the country. However, because SSA was staffed to respond to only a portion of the population, it initially planned to promote availability of the 800 number to 60 percent of the population and planned to carefully promote the number to the rest of the country at a later date.

Mr. Chairman, as you know, we reported on SSA's decision to go to a nationwide 800 system and presented our views in a September 1988 report prepared at your request[1]. At that time we pointed out that there was some risk in proceeding with 800 service--namely, that the demand for service could greatly exceed capacity, particularly if the use of the 800 number was promoted beyond the system's capabilities.

My testimony today will address the quality of access under 800 service. Also, I will address concerns that have been

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[1]SOCIAL SECURITY: Decision to Implement National 800 Telephone Service (GAO/HRD-88-120, September 12, 1988).

expressed over the accuracy of the information that SSA representatives are providing over the phone.

ACCESS TO THE 800 NUMBER

Perhaps the most important measure of the quality of phone access is the rate of busy signals. In looking at busy signals under the 800 system, two standards of comparison must be kept in mind. The first is performance under SSA's old system for which the rate of busy signals nationally was about 15 percent, as measured by GAO in 1985 and 1988. The second is SSA's performance goal under the new 800 system, which is a busy signal rate of 5 percent or less measured nationally on a monthly basis. According to SSA, its goal of 5 percent will be realized when 800 service is fully operational, after October 1 of this year.

System performance for 800 service for the first 6 months is as follows: for October, November, and December 1988, the busy signal rate was about 17 percent. In January and February 1989, the rates were 43 and 35 percent, respectively. And finally, for March 1989, the rate was 9 percent (see fig. 1).

The busy signal rates for October, November, and December--the latter two months traditionally being SSA's least busy--are about the same as we measured under the old system. However, the

performance in January and February deteriorated badly, with busy rates far exceeding those we have measured in any of our previous work. Traditionally, January is SSA's busiest month, and in January 1989 the agency received 5.2 million calls, about double the number of calls that it received in December. In February, SSA received 4.8 million calls and experienced a busy rate of 35 percent. Figure 2, in the attachment to the testimony, shows the total number of calls made and the number receiving busy signals.

Compounding the problem of managing a traditionally high call volume for January is that in the last 2 weeks of December, SSA promoted the availability of the 800 number (via a notice in the mail) to its approximately 18 million direct-deposit beneficiaries. Also exacerbating the access problem was a mailout for non-direct-deposit beneficiaries that reached another 18 million beneficiaries on February 3. The number of additional calls generated by the two promotions is not known.

We do not believe the promotions were prudent, given the uncertainties surrounding the potential effect of such a promotion. Further, the promotions were contrary to SSA plans articulated to us during our review of SSA's decision to implement 800 service. Our September 1988 report stated: "To restrict access to the 800 number--and to avoid being overwhelmed by calls in excess of its capabilities--SSA plans to carefully promote and advertise the availability of the (800) number."

Additionally, in September 1988, SSA also started promoting 800 service by including a notice of 800 number availability in mailings of new and replacement social security cards. In calendar year 1987, SSA issued 16.7 million of these cards.

How well SSA planned for January and February is difficult to determine because there is little hard information on what was communicated to the regions and the Teleservice Centers (TSCs) in preparation for these months, or what was actually done by the regions. In a December 1, 1988, memorandum, SSA headquarters notified the regions of the SSA mailout promoting the 800 number and told them it would increase the amount of phone traffic and directed them to take appropriate action. Also, we were told by SSA that there were teleconferences between headquarters and the SSA regional commissioners in which the regions were told to provide full staff coverage for peak days. We do not know what the regions actually did because they were not required to report on the actions they had taken.

In March 1989, SSA experienced its lowest busy signal rate to date--9 percent. To achieve this rate--in contrast to January and February--SSA headquarters took a number of initiatives such as implementating a major call routing plan and special staffing for 5 peak volume days. Also, SSA benefited from a significant reduction in the number of calls--from 4.8 million in February to 3.4 million in March. The routing plan

involves moving telephone calls from busy TSCs to TSCs with excess capacity. The ability to do this is a unique feature of the 800 system, which according to SSA will not reach its full potential in this regard until it is complete in October 1989. The special staffing to bolster TSC capacity was provided by SSA facilities near SSA's 37 TSCs. These facilities included SSA district and branch offices, regional offices, and program service centers. According to SSA data, the amount of additional staff time devoted to the first 3 peak volume days was about 21,700 hours. This amounts to 7,200 hours per day, or the equivalent of 900 individuals per day. For comparison purposes this equates to about a 45-percent increase over the current TSC staffing level of about 1,980.

In addition to the staffing provided for the 5 peak days in March, on the basis of discussions with 6 TSC managers, it appears that special staffing was also added for many other days in March at the discretion of SSA regional management. The managers indicated that special staffing efforts often were provided for the months preceding March. We do not know the amount and extent of such staffing because SSA headquarters has not tracked supplemental staffing for the TSCs except for the 5 peak days in March.

While the reassignment of staff contributed to the reduction of this busy signal rate for March it raises questions about the

impact on the operations of the field facilities. For example, busy times in district and branch offices often coincide with busy times in TSCs. Given the increasing concern that SSA managers have about ongoing staff cuts affecting their service, these additional staffing disruptions may place more pressure on these offices.

ACCURACY OF TELEPHONE RESPONSES

SSA has completed two special studies of the accuracy of responses provided under the new 800 system. While the studies provide some insight to the accuracy of information provided over the phone, methodologies employed preclude drawing broad conclusions on the overall accuracy of telephone responses, and the results are not comparable because of differences between the two methodologies.

The first study was completed in December 1988. About 4,300 calls were placed by SSA personnel to the TSCs during 1 week in October and 1 week in November. Fourteen predetermined questions covered the Retirement, Survivors, Disability, and Health Insurance programs (trust fund programs), and 10 questions covered the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program.

The study found 6 percent of the responses to the trust fund program questions contained incorrect information that

could potentially result in an incorrect payment or loss of benefits. Another 3 percent of the responses contained incorrect information that could result in additional SSA workloads (1 percent) or caller inconvenience (2 percent). For the 14 questions, the proportion of total incorrect responses ranged from 2.5 percent for a question on disability benefits to 22.9 percent for a question on the annual earnings test for individuals 70 and older.

For the SSI program, the study found that almost 18 percent of the responses contained incorrect information that could result in an incorrect payment or loss of benefits. Another 6 percent of the responses contained incorrect information that could result in additional SSA workloads (2 percent) or caller inconvenience (4 percent). For the 10 SSI questions, the proportion of total incorrect responses ranged from 5.6 percent for a question on representative payees to 51.5 percent for a question on in-kind support and maintenance.

The second study involved 6,728 calls and covered the period from February 14 through March 10, 1989. For this study, 40 predetermined questions covered general inquiries and the trust fund programs. For the SSI program, a total of 30 questions were asked. For the trust fund programs, the errors that could result in an incorrect payment or loss of benefits totaled 4.3 percent. For the SSI program, the error rate was 14.7 percent.

TRAINING OF STAFF

The accuracy of responses to the questions is a direct function of how well SSA telephone representatives are trained. In this respect, two situations that we are aware of may have an adverse impact on accuracy.

There are indications that some of the staff used to supplement the TSC staff may not be qualified. In supplementing the TSC staff with personnel from local SSA facilities, SSA headquarters officials and six TSC managers we talked with said that most of the additional personnel were service representatives. The training for this position is the same training given to SSA teleservice representatives (TSRs); consequently service representatives are the preferred substitute or supplement for regular TSR staffing. At the same time, however, the TSC managers told us that it was not uncommon to use personnel other than service representatives to answer phones. These employees were from regional offices, program service centers and field offices. We do not know the number or qualifications of these individuals.

Potentially the biggest problem that SSA faces with respect to response accuracy is SSA's plan for expanding 800 service. Between now and October 1, 1989, SSA plans to add about 1,100

people to the 800 system. Because most of this staff will represent new hires, we believe that SSA could have a decline in accuracy until the new hires gain some experience and familiarity with SSA programs.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

To sum up Mr. Chairman, the experience thus far under the 800 system has convinced us that measures need to be taken to assure that the public will receive good phone service in the future.

First, based on the experience early this year additional promotion of a system that is already overloaded can have significant negative results. We believe that SSA should cease all promotion of 800 service until (1) the performance of the system is stabilized and improved and (2) the expansion of the remaining 40 percent of the country is complete. For example, SSA should rule out activities being considered, such as an Ad Council promotion and revisions to telephone listings in local phone books. Also, SSA should discontinue notifying recipients of social security cards of the availability of the 800 number.

Second, 800 service has not yet been stabilized. Service was poor for January and February and while March improved, SSA

took extraordinary and potentially disruptive measures to reduce busy signals. In this regard it is important that temporary staff reassignments be kept to a minimum because of the potential disruption to other parts of SSA. Consequently, while SSA currently plans to complete staffing the 800 system by October 1, 1989, we believe expansion of the system should be contingent on sustained improved service at planned staffing levels. SSA should first reduce busy signals for the 60 percent of the population now being served by bringing its performance levels, over a sustained period of time, closer to the planned goals. When this is achieved, SSA should then proceed to serve the rest of the country on an incremental basis, with service for each increment being dependent on the quality of service provided to the population already being served.

Third, SSA should know the total staffing that is being devoted to the 800 system. On the basis of discussions with six TSC managers, there may be significant staffing, other than regular TSC staff, used to help answer phones. Knowledge of total staff resources used is needed to develop effective strategies for reducing the rate of busy signals and to plan for the expansion of 800 service.

Finally, SSA's efforts to measure the accuracy of its responses to phone inquiries should be designed in a fashion

which permits (1) a systematic, comprehensive evaluation of response accuracy and (2) an analysis of trends in this data over time. The results of any evaluation of this nature should be fed back into SSA training programs for TSRs.

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Mr. Chairman, that concludes my testimony. We will be happy to respond to any questions that you might have.

Figure 1: SSA 800 Phone Service Rate of Busy Signals
(October 1988-March 1989)

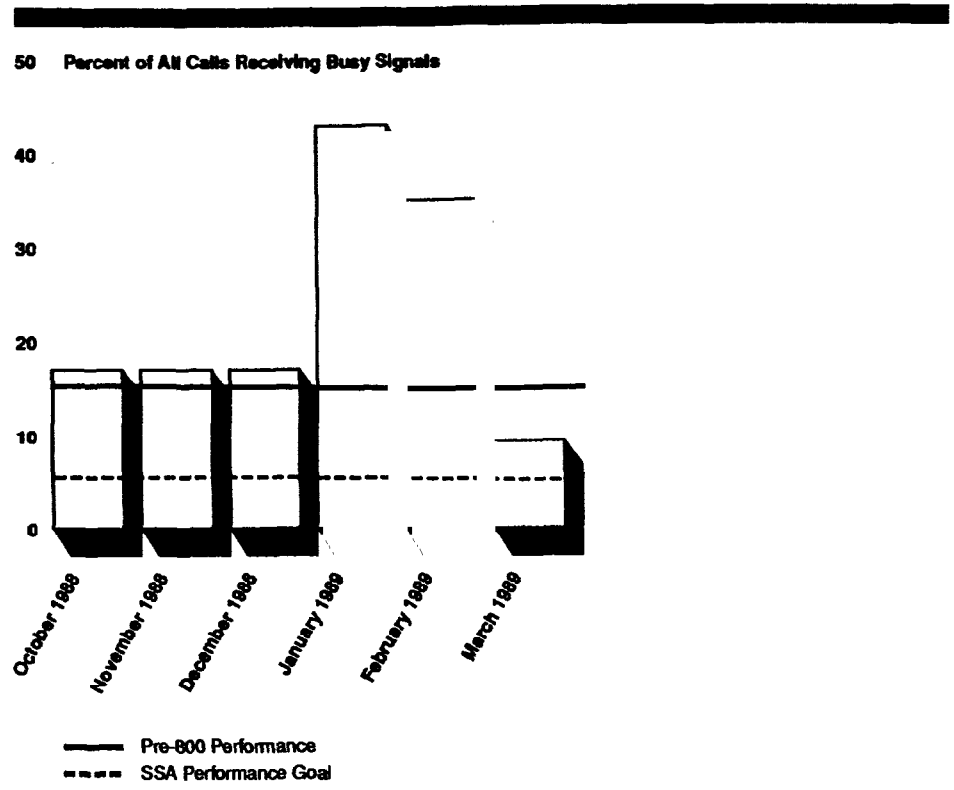

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Figure 2: Total Calls Versus Calls Receiving Busy Signals (November 1988-March 1989)