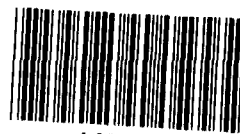
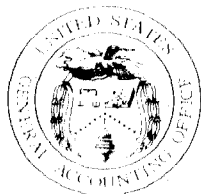


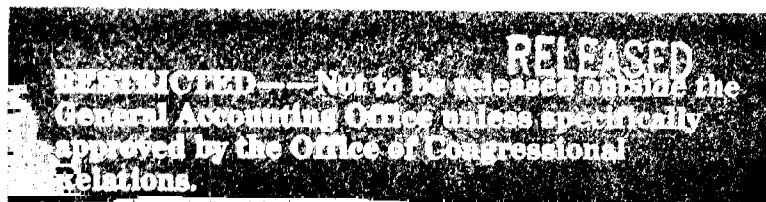
March 1991

SOCIAL SECURITY

Restoration of Telephone Access to Local SSA Offices



143528



Human Resources Division

B-243150

March 5, 1991

The Honorable Lloyd Bentsen
Chairman, Committee on Finance
United States Senate

The Honorable Dan Rostenkowski
Chairman, Committee on Ways and Means
House of Representatives

The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1990 (OBRA) requires that by May 4, 1991, the Social Security Administration (SSA) restore the public's telephone access to local offices at the level generally available on September 30, 1989. OBRA requires SSA to publish telephone numbers and addresses for affected offices. OBRA also requires GAO to review the level of telephone access by the public to local SSA offices and issue an interim report by March 5, 1991, and a final updated report by June 3, 1991.

As agreed with your offices, this interim report provides information on (1) SSA's policy for directing the public to either the nationwide 800 telephone service or local field offices, (2) SSA's plans for publishing local office telephone numbers and addresses, (3) changes in available telephone lines and equipment in affected offices since September 1989, and (4) staffing levels for these offices since September 1989.

Background

SSA implemented a toll-free 800 number telephone service nationwide to improve its service to the public and to save resources. SSA intended the 800 service as the entry point for all calls from the public, with teleservice representatives (TSRs) handling routine calls (such as requests for social security number applications, benefit estimates, and eligibility requirements) directly and referring other, more complex matters to local offices for resolution. SSA believed that removing routine calls from local office workloads would give field office staff more time to concentrate on complex work and handle walk-in traffic. These goals seemed particularly important in light of SSA's substantial reduction in staff over the past 5 years.

Just before the nationwide 800 service was introduced, about 50 percent of the public contacting SSA by phone did so by placing toll-free calls to 1 of 34 teleservice centers (TSCs). About 40 percent of the public, mostly rural area residents, contacted SSA by placing either toll-free calls to 1 of about 30 small centralized answering units or local calls to local SSA field

offices. The other 10 percent of the public paid long distance charges to call SSA offices.

SSA introduced toll-free 800 service to the nation in two phases. In October 1988, SSA initiated the first phase of 800 service for the 60 percent of the population who were served by TSCs or had been paying long distance charges to reach SSA offices. In October 1989, SSA began the second phase by extending the 800 service to the other 40 percent of the population residing primarily in rural areas.

At the start of the second phase, SSA immediately extended the 800 service to areas where calls had been made directly to local field offices and several of the 30 small centralized answering units. It planned to phase in (over a 3-month period) service to areas served by the remaining small centralized answering units. As SSA extended the service, affected offices stopped receiving calls over their general inquiry phone lines, although they continued to operate nonpublished business telephone numbers for administering office operations. SSA requested telephone companies to (1) intercept calls to general inquiry numbers and give callers the 800 number and (2) change telephone directories to list the 800 number instead of local office numbers.

Soon after phase 2 began, an increase in the volume of calls to the 800 service resulted in the 800 number being plagued with a higher rate of busy signals than had occurred under phase 1. To combat this, in early November 1989, SSA temporarily removed intercepts placed on general inquiry telephone numbers for more than 350 phase 2 offices. These offices had indicated that they could resume handling the telephone workload. The 800 service remained available to the public served by these offices, but the public now could also call the local office. The public served by the approximately 440 remaining phase 2 offices can reach SSA only by calling the 800 number.

Results in Brief

SSA has interpreted OBRA as requiring the agency to place orders with local telephone companies requesting them to publish, in their directories, local telephone numbers and addresses for field offices not under the 800 service as of September 30, 1989 (about 790 offices). SSA officials said the agency intends to give the public served by these offices two options for telephoning SSA—either local field offices or the 800 service. The officials said also that the agency will not attempt to redirect callers from the local field offices to its 800 service.

SSA allowed field staff and telephone equipment levels to decline in the months preceding and following the October 1989 changeover because it anticipated switching the local field office telephone workload to the 800 service. SSA does not plan increases in either staffing or equipment to meet possible additional workloads at local offices because funding has not been provided for such increases. Further, SSA said that since it has no way of knowing how many persons will choose to call local offices rather than the 800 service, it can not reasonably estimate future local field staffing needs. SSA officials told us that field office managers will be expected to strike a balance with existing staff and telephone equipment being used to handle both other office workloads and telephone calls from the public.

SSA's Policy on Providing Phone Numbers to the Public

When SSA started its 800 service in October 1988, it restricted the public's access to local field office phone numbers in areas served by the 800 service. This policy was changed in January 1990. Initially, SSA TSRS staffing the 800 telephone service were instructed to provide callers with a local field office's telephone number only if the caller refused to be helped by the TSR and insisted on having the local telephone number. SSA discovered that its TSRS were following even more restrictive practices, such as releasing the local field office number only when (1) approval was received from the TSR's supervisor or (2) the caller was requesting the status of a pending claim.

In January 1990, SSA issued a program circular stating that effective immediately, all TSRS would give the caller the servicing local field office number upon request after offering or providing assistance. In August 1990, the Teleservice Center Operating Guide was updated to reflect this change. SSA later reminded all TSRS to provide the local field office number to the public upon request.

In October 1990, the SSA Commissioner approved an agencywide policy for telephone numbers to be used on correspondence SSA has with the public. This policy required that:

- About 70 percent of the 5 million computer-generated notices that SSA sends to the public carry the 800 number.
- Almost all notices manually prepared by program service centers show the 800 number.
- All notices manually prepared by the field offices contain the number of the originating field office.

SSA officials advised us that a local office number would also be provided in instances where it appeared that a local field office would have to be contacted.

SSA officials advised us that local field offices, when contacted directly, should not be redirecting callers to the 800 service. They stated further that they were not aware of any local offices currently redirecting calls, but said they were considering circulating a memorandum to the local offices explicitly stating this policy.

SSA's Plans for Publishing Phone Numbers and Office Addresses

SSA officials said that the agency intends to provide and publish a general inquiry telephone number for the approximately 790 local field offices that began 800 service in October 1989. They said local numbers will be provided to the public by local telephone companies' directory assistance by the required May 4, 1991, compliance date. However, the publication schedule for local telephone directories will determine when field offices' telephone numbers and addresses are published.

On December 5, 1990, SSA instructed affected field office managers to immediately request local telephone companies to (1) have local directory assistance provide the public a local field office telephone number and (2) list the local office telephone number and address, in addition to the 800 number, in telephone directories. SSA instructed office managers to request the directory assistance change as soon as possible and the directory listing no later than March 1, 1991. SSA officials told us that requests for directory listings can require long lead times—possibly up to 18 months—before numbers and addresses are published.

SSA suggested local field office managers request telephone companies to use the following format for directory listings.

Social Security Administration
General Information and Services
Toll-Free Dial "1" and then 800-234-5772

Office Locations
709 E. Lombard Street Baltimore — Local #
1370 Martin Boulevard Baltimore — Local #

SSA's suggested format should restore publication of office addresses omitted from telephone directories during the switch to 800 service. SSA officials explained that most telephone companies do not list addresses with a toll-free 800 number. Therefore, when some companies published the 800 number, they automatically omitted addresses for local SSA field offices—even though it was never SSA's intent that they do so.

Changes in Available Telephone Equipment

SSA said that the amount of field office telephone equipment (principally telephones and incoming lines) dedicated to receiving telephone calls from the public may have decreased marginally since September 30, 1989. SSA officials told us that before September 1989, field offices may not have replaced or repaired telephone equipment because they assumed their telephone workloads would be shifting to the 800 service after September 1989. These officials said that existing available telephone equipment will be used to receive calls from the public. Data on the number of telephone lines and equipment at affected offices had not been compiled by SSA. SSA is conducting a telephone equipment survey designed by us to quantify any changes in equipment levels it has experienced. We will report separately on the survey results in our final report in June 1991.

According to SSA, its regional commissioners and office managers for the affected offices will decide practical ways to resume handling calls from the public. Taking into consideration budget constraints and the availability of staff and equipment, they will specify how many telephone lines will be used exclusively for receiving general inquiry calls or making outgoing business calls. SSA said that it has advised local field office managers that each office should have at least one general inquiry line.

Office managers for the 790 affected offices have options available to restore access to local offices. These options include requesting local telephone companies to reestablish former service or give the public the telephone number of a line normally used to make outgoing business calls.

Changes in Available Staff

SSA does not plan to increase local field office staff even though it believes total staff in the affected offices has decreased slightly from September 1989 levels. SSA stated that the Congress has not appropriated funds for additional staff at local field offices to handle the telephone workload.

Our preliminary analyses indicate that overall, local field offices now have fewer total staff available to answer calls from the public than were available in September 1989. SSA information on the 790 affected offices shows that staff decreased by 3.8 percent—from 15,512 in 1989 to 14,923 in December 1990.

Moreover, the number of available service representatives—staff principally responsible for handling calls from the public—decreased by 9 percent—from 1,973 in September 1989 to 1,796 in December 1990.

SSA expects that office personnel who usually handle more complex work and walk-in visits will need to begin answering telephone inquiries in addition to their other duties. SSA officials told us that the majority of field office staff are qualified to handle telephone inquiries.

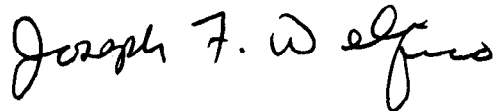
Scope and Methodology

Our information was obtained primarily through interviews with SSA officials. In addition, we reviewed agency records and instructions issued to field offices for implementing the provisions of OBRA, and we reviewed SSA records in order to identify changes in staffing levels at local field offices between September 30, 1989, and December 28, 1990. Data on the number of telephones and lines available at specific times at the 790 local field offices had not been compiled by SSA. We did not obtain written comments on a draft of this report, but we discussed its contents with agency officials and incorporated their comments where appropriate.

Our work was performed at SSA headquarters in Baltimore between December 1990 and February 1991 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

As arranged with your offices, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days after its issue date. At that time we will send copies to the Secretary of Health and Human Services and the Commissioner of Social Security. We will also make copies available to other interested parties upon request. As required by law, we will issue a final report on this subject by June 3, 1991.

If you have any questions or would like additional information, please call me on (202) 275-6193. Other major contributors are included in appendix I.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joseph F. Delfico".

Joseph F. Delfico
Director, Income Security Issues

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