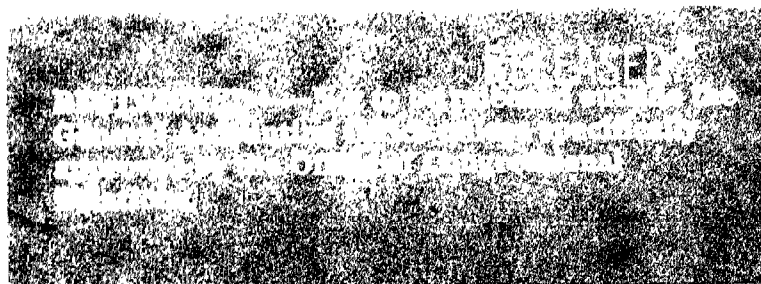
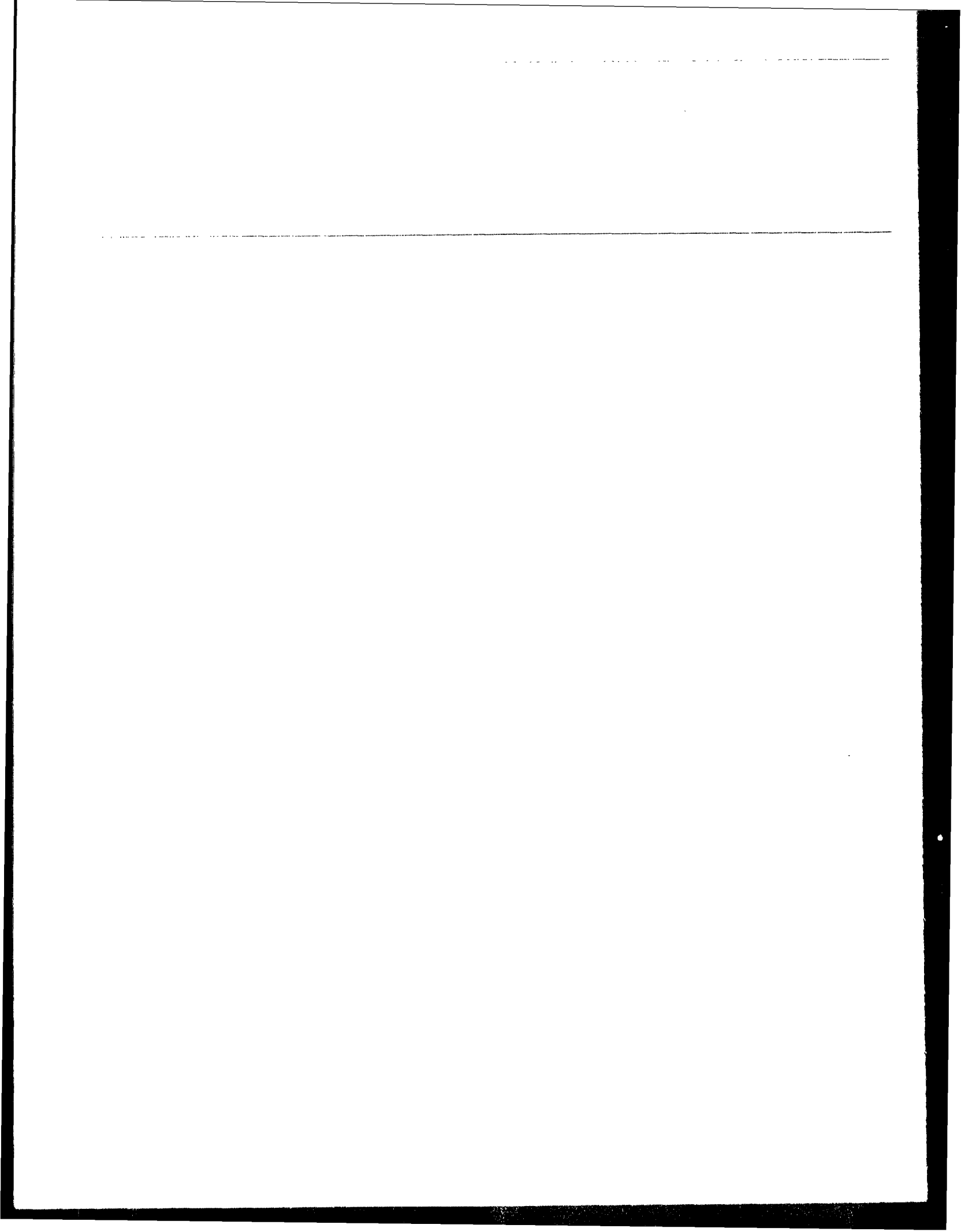


September 1991

# SOCIAL SECURITY

## Telephone Access to Local Field Offices





**Human Resources Division**

B-243150

September 13, 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 the Social Security Administration (SSA) maintain the public's telephone access to local offices at the level generally available on September 30, 1989. It also requires SSA to request telephone companies to publish telephone numbers and addresses for local offices. In addition, the act requires that GAO review and issue interim and final reports on the level of telephone access by the public to local SSA offices.

In March 1991, we issued our interim report on SSA's plans to restore local telephone access.<sup>1</sup> This final report provides (1) information on changes in the number of available telephone lines and staffing at certain local SSA field offices between September 1989 and May 1991 and (2) the status of SSA's actions to implement the OBRA provision.

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**Results in Brief**

To implement OBRA, local SSA field offices have requested local telephone companies to make the necessary changes in their telephone directories and directory assistance so that local SSA office addresses and telephone numbers are available to the public, in addition to SSA's national toll-free 800 telephone number. While SSA has maintained local office general inquiry telephone service, some offices have fewer lines and less staffing available to handle telephone inquiries than on September 30, 1989.

SSA's local field offices have experienced reductions in both staffing and telephone equipment since September 1989, the date that OBRA uses as a benchmark for telephone service levels. This happened in conjunction with the agency's overall downsizing program and because it planned to convert its telephone service entirely to a national 800 telephone service. SSA interprets OBRA as allowing it some discretion in deciding how

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<sup>1</sup>Social Security: Restoration of Telephone Access to Local SSA Offices (GAO/HRD-91-76FS, Mar. 5, 1991).

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local telephone access will be achieved. Therefore, SSA does not plan to restore the decreases that have occurred.

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## Background

SSA's nationwide toll-free 800 telephone service provides the public with one free telephone number—an 800 number—on which to reach SSA. As the 800 service was being expanded in increments nationwide, SSA planned to discontinue having its local field offices receive calls from the public. SSA had begun its 800 telephone service to improve its service to the public and save agency personnel resources.

Before the nationwide 800 service was conceived, about 50 percent of the public (generally people in larger metropolitan areas) telephoning SSA did so through teleservice centers (TSC), centralized SSA answering centers. Thus, when about half of the public used a local telephone directory or directory assistance to contact SSA, they were given the number of a TSC rather than the number of the local SSA office. The other half of the population (mainly rural residents) were provided the telephone number of their local SSA offices or small centralized answering units when they attempted to contact SSA.

In October 1988, SSA introduced its nationwide 800 telephone service in the first of two phases. The change in service during phase 1 involved having the public reach TSCs by a single national 800 number rather than through each TSC's individual telephone number. This service was also made available to about 10 percent of the population, which formerly had to make toll calls to reach their local SSA offices.

With the completion of phase 1, the telephone numbers for about 40 percent of SSA's local field offices<sup>2</sup> were not available to the public<sup>3</sup>—only the national 800 number was given out. The remaining 60 percent of SSA's local field offices still had their telephone number available through the local telephone directory and directory assistance and continued to accept calls from the public.

SSA initiated phase 2 of the 800 service in October 1989. This phase involved redirecting the remaining 40 percent of the public's calls to any

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<sup>2</sup>At phase 1's completion (Sept. 1989), SSA's nationwide field organization included 1,298 district and branch offices and 71 resident stations (less-than-full-service facilities) to serve the public at the local level.

<sup>3</sup>Individual SSA clients could, and still can, call any local office on numbers given them by SSA personnel or provided in SSA correspondence sent to them. The public in general, however, could not get a local SSA office number from the telephone company.

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of the 834 phase 2 offices to SSA's toll-free service.<sup>4</sup> These offices requested their local telephone companies to place intercept messages on their general inquiry lines (for which telephone numbers were published by telephone companies) and to give callers the national 800 number. SSA instructed its local offices to retain these intercepts until local telephone directories were revised to reflect the 800 number only, instead of their office telephone numbers.

However, soon after phase 2 was implemented, the 800 service experienced such a heavy volume of calls that its busy-signal rates reached 50 percent for several months. Thus, SSA asked 345 of its phase 2 local offices to temporarily reestablish their direct telephone service by removing the intercepts on their general inquiry lines. The remaining 489 phase 2 offices continued to have intercept messages referring the public to the 800 service.

During this period, some Members of Congress became concerned that the public no longer had access by telephone to their local offices. In November 1990, responding to this the Congress included a section in the 1990 OBRA legislation that directed the Secretary of Health and Human Services to restore access to the phase 2 local SSA offices. The provision required that SSA

- maintain access by telephone to SSA local offices at the level generally available as of September 30, 1989, and
- make such requests of local telephone utilities in the United States as are necessary to ensure that the listings subsequently maintained and published by such utilities for each locality include the address and telephone number for each SSA local office to which direct telephone access is maintained.

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## Scope and Methodology

Our work was performed between April and June 1991 at SSA headquarters in Baltimore, and 21 phase 2 local field offices. Our work included interviews with SSA officials and reviews of agency instructions issued to field offices for implementing the provisions of OBRA. We analyzed SSA payroll data and survey responses received from the field offices to measure changes in staff and equipment levels since September 30, 1989. On a sample basis, we verified various items of information, such

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<sup>4</sup>For our interim report, SSA could not provide us an exact number of phase 2 offices, but estimated there were 790. SSA has since revised the number to 834, including district and branch offices and resident stations.

as the placing of orders by SSA local offices with telephone companies to have their local telephone numbers published, the actual number of general inquiry lines available in local offices, and the availability of local office telephone numbers through directory assistance. We performed this review in compliance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Appendix I provides more detail on our scope and methodology.

## Changes in Staffing and Telephone Equipment Levels

Since September 30, 1989, the levels of staffing and telephone equipment (lines and telephone sets) available at the 834 affected phase 2 local offices have decreased. (See app. II for results of telephone equipment survey.) Staff decreases occurred with SSA's 20-percent downsizing program. Local offices permitted telephone equipment to decline in anticipation of the nationwide 800 telephone service, which was to be provided by TSCs.

From September 1989 to February 1991, the number of service representatives—staff principally responsible for handling calls from the public—available in phase 2 offices decreased 7.5 percent (from 2,086 to 1,930). Also, the total staff in these offices decreased 3.8 percent (from 16,157 to 15,543).

Phase 2 offices estimated in the telephone equipment survey that between September 1989 and May 1991, their number of general inquiry telephone lines available to the public decreased 30 percent (from 2,559 to 1,793). As shown in table 1, however, there was a disparity in these reductions between those offices that did or did not reestablish telephone service in November 1989.

**Table 1: Comparison of General Inquiry Lines Among Offices Reestablishing or Not Reestablishing Service**

	Offices	General inquiry lines		Decrease	
		9/30/89	5/5/91	Number	Percent
Reestablishing service	345	1,076	903	173	16.1
Not reestablishing service	489	1,483	890	593	40.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>834</b>	<b>2,559</b>	<b>1,793</b>	<b>766</b>	<b>30.0</b>

About 43 percent of the offices responded that they expected to have fewer general inquiry lines available in May 1991 than they did in September 1989. (See app. III for information on those offices that lost general inquiry lines.) The remaining 57 percent of the offices estimated that they would have at least the same number of lines.

To validate this information, we conducted tests of the availability of general inquiry lines at 50 randomly selected local SSA offices. Based on our tests, we concluded that the number of general inquiry lines available at local offices was almost the same as originally estimated by SSA.<sup>5</sup>

Site visits by our staff to 21 local SSA field offices showed that 18 offices had at least the number of general inquiry lines they had originally estimated. The other three had one to four fewer lines.

## Status of SSA's Actions to Implement OBRA Provisions

SSA has placed orders with local telephone companies requesting them to publish the office telephone numbers and addresses for phase 2 offices. SSA also has advised its local field offices to have at least one general inquiry line available to the public and take steps to handle all calls from the public and not redirect the callers to the 800 service.

## Status of SSA's Actions to List the Telephone Numbers of Local Offices

As required by OBRA, affected SSA local offices placed orders with their local telephone companies by May 4, 1991, to publish, in local directories, telephone numbers and addresses for phase 2 field offices.

On December 5, 1990, SSA headquarters officials instructed phase 2 office managers to immediately request local telephone companies to have local directory assistance provide the public with an office telephone number and list that number and the address—in addition to the 800 number—in telephone directories as soon as possible. In March 1991, SSA regional offices provided SSA headquarters written summaries reporting on the status of their restoration activities. These summaries suggested that by May 4, 1991 (the mandated compliance date), practically all offices would have placed orders requesting needed service.

However, not all regional offices provided SSA headquarters with the exact number of local SSA offices that would need to place orders<sup>6</sup> with

<sup>5</sup>The universe for this sample included 547 local SSA field offices. Offices that did not respond to certain questions were excluded. We estimate that about 93 percent of the general inquiry lines estimated by SSA to be available in May 1991 were actually available at the local offices in our sample. At the 95-percent confidence level, the sampling error is  $\pm 8$  percentage points, giving a confidence interval between 85 to 101 percent. (See app. I.)

<sup>6</sup>Not all 834 phase 2 offices had to formally place orders with telephone companies to list their local numbers and addresses. For example, offices that agreed to reestablish their local telephone service in November 1989 continued to list their telephone numbers in local directories and others may have been able to request telephone companies to reconnect their "old" general inquiry number, which was already available in the local telephone directory.

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telephone companies or the status of each office's request. Consequently, we could not determine the exact number of offices that had to and did place orders with telephone companies.

We performed a test verification of a random sample of 50 local SSA offices, which showed that all of them had submitted written requests to local telephone companies for publishing local office numbers in their directories. Independent calls to directory assistance for these 50 locations by us in May and June 1991 showed that the local number was available for 49 of the locations. In the other instance, SSA had on several occasions requested the telephone company to make the change, but the telephone company had not yet done so.

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### **Callers Not Redirected to the 800 Service**

Congressional sources had expressed concern that local SSA offices might try to reduce their telephone work loads by referring callers to the 800 service. However, in tests we performed, no local SSA office staff tried to redirect us to the nationwide 800 number.

In our interim report we stated that although SSA did not have an explicit policy to preclude local offices from redirecting callers to the 800 service, the agency was not aware of any local offices redirecting calls to the 800 service. On March 1, 1991, in response to our inquiry, SSA issued a memorandum reminding field offices of its policy to provide the public the most complete service at the initial point of contact.

In an attempt to verify whether offices were following SSA policy, we successfully completed calls to 68 phase 2 local SSA offices to request assistance. In no instance did SSA staff attempt to redirect us to the nationwide 800 service.

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### **Further Implementation Actions Will Not Involve Staff or Equipment Increases**

SSA officials have noted that the Congress did not appropriate funds for additional staff or equipment at local field offices to handle telephone work loads. The agency maintains that local office managers have the flexibility to utilize existing budgeted staff and telephone equipment in the manner in which they believe they can provide the best possible public service.

Accordingly, SSA does not have plans to increase local field office staff or to install additional telephone lines or equipment in these offices to bring them up to the levels that existed in September 1989. Instead, it intends to provide local office telephone service with existing staff and



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equipment. SSA has taken the position that the OBRA language is broad enough to allow the agency some flexibility in determining how many staff and telephone lines it would need to provide the public with access to local SSA offices at the level generally available on September 30, 1989.

While SSA's implementation meets the technical requirements of OBRA, it is, in our opinion, risking longer-term public service problems. By planning to implement OBRA by focusing only on publishing the addresses and telephone numbers of the 834 local SSA field offices and maintaining at least one general inquiry line at each of these offices, SSA ignores the possibility that the volume of general inquiry calls to offices with reduced call-handling capacity will exceed some offices' capabilities, thus degrading service to the public.

In recent testimony before the House Ways and Means Committee,<sup>7</sup> we highlighted the need for a shared vision between the Congress and the agencies over what constitutes acceptable service to the public. This specific instance illustrates the need for such a shared vision so that service level goals and standards can be established for telephone service.

In the near future, we intend to review specific elements of telephone service being provided over the 800 system and in local SSA offices and the possible impact of the new local telephone service on other field office work loads.

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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.

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<sup>7</sup>Service to the Public: How Effective and Responsive Is the Government? (GAO/T-HRD-91-26, May 8, 1991).

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This report was prepared under the direction of Joseph F. Delfico, Director, Income Security Issues. If you have any questions or would like additional information regarding this report, you may contact him on (202) 275-6193. Other major contributors are listed in appendix IV.

*Lawrence H. Thompson*

Lawrence H. Thompson  
Assistant Comptroller General

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## Abbreviations

GAO	General Accounting Office
OBRA	Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1990
SSA	Social Security Administration
TSC	teleservice center



# Scope and Methodology

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We interviewed SSA officials and reviewed the agency's instructions issued to its local field offices for implementing the provisions of OBRA. We also reviewed SSA payroll data to identify changes in staffing levels for the 834 affected phase 2 offices from September 1989 through February 1991, which were the latest data available.

We analyzed SSA questionnaire responses received from 834 SSA local field offices. Responses included office manager estimates of the number of telephone lines and other telephone equipment available at their locations on specific dates (Sept. 30, 1989; Jan. 1, 1991; and May 5, 1991). (See app. II for survey results.) We used these results to assess changes in the number of telephone lines and sets over time and among various categories.

We performed limited verification of the survey results submitted by SSA offices. We randomly sampled 50 local SSA offices to test selected survey responses received from them. These tests included (1) calling the local directory assistance operators to determine whether the local office number was available, (2) obtaining copies of the letters sent to local telephone companies from SSA offices requesting changes in future telephone directories and directory assistance, and (3) placing multiple simultaneous calls to SSA's local offices to verify the number of general inquiry lines reported.

In addition, we made calls to 68 local SSA offices to determine whether they would answer our questions or attempt to redirect us to SSA's 800 service. We also made on-site visits to 21 phase 2 offices to discuss the survey results with local managers and validate the number of general inquiry lines and telephone sets available at these locations.

We requested a subsection-by-subsection interpretation of the OBRA provisions from SSA. In response, SSA provided us with a copy of its letter to the Chairman of the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Social Security, which SSA maintains is its interpretation of the legislation. The provisions of OBRA and its legislative history were reviewed by our Office of General Counsel.

We did not obtain written comments on a draft of this report, but we discussed its contents with SSA officials. Our work was performed at SSA headquarters in Baltimore, and 21 SSA field offices between April and June 1991 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

# Phase 2 Offices' Responses to Telephone Equipment Survey by SSA in January 1991

Phase 2 offices use telephone lines and sets to receive calls from the public. They publish one telephone number but may reserve multiple telephone lines to receive calls made to the number in addition to having multiple telephone sets on which to answer these calls. Table II.1 shows changes in phase 2 offices' telephone lines and sets used for receiving calls from the public between September 1989 and May 1991.

**Table II.1: Estimated Changes in Phase 2 Office Telephone Equipment\***

	Sept. 30, 1989	May 5, 1991
<b>Telephone lines used to receive calls from the public</b>		
Total	2,559	1,793
Average	3.1	2.2
<b>Telephone sets routinely used to answer calls from the public</b>		
Total	3,481	2,907
Average	4.2	3.5
<b>Telephone sets that could be used to answer calls from the public</b>		
Total	9,927	9,771
Average	12.0	11.8

\*Aggregated responses to selected questions contained on survey document.

# Summary of Phase 2 Offices Reporting Fewer General Inquiry Lines in 1991 Than They Had in 1989

State	Total phase 2 offices	Offices losing lines	Number of lines in losing offices		
			Sept. 30, 1989	May 5, 1991	Lost
Alabama	22	8	47	25	22
Alaska	4	3	8	3	5
Arizona	2	0	•	•	•
Arkansas	19	6	29	13	16
California	48	13	58	16	42
Colorado	12	6	19	10	9
Connecticut	17	12	45	16	29
Delaware	2	2	6	2	4
Florida	22	6	29	11	18
Georgia	29	10	44	27	17
Hawaii	0	0	•	•	•
Idaho	7	1	11	1	10
Illinois	30	22	81	29	52
Indiana	20	18	59	23	36
Iowa	19	3	11	6	5
Kansas	13	3	19	14	5
Kentucky	26	7	24	9	15
Louisiana	23	13	41	18	23
Maine	8	5	16	7	9
Maryland	7	0	•	•	•
Massachusetts	20	9	28	9	19
Michigan	26	17	71	24	47
Minnesota	12	5	14	7	7
Mississippi	23	1	5	3	2
Missouri	21	3	12	9	3
Montana	7	2	5	3	2
Nebraska	9	1	13	2	11
Nevada	4	2	11	2	9
New Hampshire	6	3	12	6	6
New Jersey	0	•	•	•	•
New Mexico	8	1	2	1	1
New York	29	19	66	33	33
North Carolina	39	12	53	24	29
North Dakota	9	6	20	14	6
Ohio	37	17	66	26	40
Oklahoma	22	12	50	23	27
Oregon	0	0	•	•	•
Pennsylvania	38	20	66	30	36

(continued)



**Appendix III**  
**Summary of Phase 2 Offices Reporting Fewer**  
**General Inquiry Lines in 1991 Than They Had**  
**in 1989**

<b>State</b>	<b>Total phase 2 offices</b>	<b>Offices losing lines</b>	<b>Number of lines in losing offices</b>		
			<b>Sept. 30, 1989</b>	<b>May 5, 1991</b>	<b>Lost</b>
Rhode Island	5	4	13	5	8
South Carolina	21	8	33	15	18
South Dakota	6	2	4	2	2
Tennessee	30	14	72	23	49
Texas	51	21	68	30	38
Utah	5	1	12	7	5
Vermont	3	2	7	2	5
Virginia	29	18	66	27	39
Washington	0	0	•	•	•
West Virginia	17	6	26	17	9
Wisconsin	21	14	47	24	23
Wyoming	6	1	2	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>834</b>	<b>359</b>	<b>1,391</b>	<b>599</b>	<b>792</b>

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