

Social Security

**Short-Term Initiatives
to Improve National 800 Number
and Program Service Center
Service to the Public**





SOCIAL SECURITY

Office of the Commissioner

November 1999

Since the National 800 Number Network was implemented in October 1988, the public has shown an increasing preference for dealing with the Social Security Administration (SSA) by telephone. This preference has been confirmed by SSA's customer surveys and parallels the experience of the private sector.

Reflecting the popularity of this service, call volumes have increased steadily over the years to the point where, during Fiscal Year 1999, we handled over 58 million phone calls. As a result, we have had to find ways to deal with this enormous workload. Up until a few years ago, we were able to hire additional teleservice representatives (TSR) and more recently we have added automated options. Further, to supplement teleservice center resources, staff from other SSA components, principally our Program Service Centers (PSC), assist with answering calls on days when very heavy call volumes are expected.

While all of these actions have contributed to high-level 800 number customer service (Our latest results show that 84 percent of our customers rate our service as "good," "very good," or "excellent."), they come at a price. In particular, we have experienced increased processing times at our PSCs where we perform activities such as recomputations of benefits for current beneficiaries with recent earnings, and activities related to the collection of benefits that have been paid incorrectly. When backlogs grow in these areas, beneficiaries entitled to increased payments must wait longer to obtain them.

In its most recent report, the Social Security Advisory Board made a number of important recommendations for service delivery improvements. Our ability to provide high quality service to the public is largely a function of the availability of resources, growth in workloads, and improvements in productivity. Despite automation and other improvements in processing, SSA, in all likelihood, will experience growth in pending workloads (i.e., workloads that are awaiting completion) due to budget resource limitations and expanding service demands.

In order to maintain good public service, I have decided to move forward on a number of short-term initiatives. These initiatives, which are dependent upon enactment of the President's budget, will improve customer service by increasing our national 800 number call answering capacity. They will also provide employees in the PSCs more time to spend on pending workloads to help us reduce expected growth.

While these are important steps, I should reiterate that these improvements are only designed to address today's workloads. They will allow us to maintain current levels of service as demands increase over the next few years. As the Advisory Board has recommended, to deal with service beyond the next few years, we are embarking on a separate planning activity that will prepare us to meet the long-term challenges that lie ahead.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kenneth S. Apfel". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Kenneth S. Apfel
Commissioner
of Social Security

INTRODUCTION

Providing high-quality service to the public, along with our stewardship of the Social Security trust funds, are arguably the most important functions of the Social Security Administration (SSA). Service provided by the Agency includes issuing Social Security numbers, maintaining wage records, determining eligibility for benefits and maintaining beneficiary (post-entitlement activities) rolls. These and other services are delivered through a variety of modes including telephone, face-to-face meetings, mail, and increasingly popular electronic avenues.

While the Agency has, for years, been considered a leader in high-quality service delivery, increasing demands have made it more and more difficult to maintain that capability. In October 1999, the Social Security Advisory Board issued a report titled "How the Social Security Administration Can Improve Its Service Delivery to the Public." The Board concluded that the Agency needed to improve its service delivery planning process to address some short-term and long-term issues, ensure that it has the human resources to carry out its plan and make improvements in service delivery practices and strategies. The Board was convinced that both external and internal factors would severely tax SSA's service delivery capabilities in the not-too-distant future.

Shortly before issuance of the Board's report, the Commissioner had directed that several initiatives be put in place as quickly as possible to address needs in the areas of 800 number telephone service and post-entitlement activity. These initiatives are designed to address the Agency's ability over the short-term to maintain the following commitments: 1) 95 percent of those who call us over the 800 number will reach us within 5 minutes, and 2) post-entitlement actions, such as recomputations of benefits, will be processed on a timely basis. These commitments are essentially maintenance-of-effort commitments. But in light of increasing workloads, and resource constraints across the Agency, they should still be viewed as representing significant challenges.

Even more challenging, as the Board noted in its report, will be planning and restructuring service delivery for the future. By 2010, workload demands on the Agency will rise dramatically as "baby boomers" age, and methods of service delivery will emerge that few of us could have dreamed of a few years ago. To address this, a separate long-term planning activity has begun that will provide the Agency with a vision for service in 2010 and beyond. But in the meantime, the initiatives described in this report will be pursued as priorities.

BACKGROUND

In October 1988, teleservice became a major way of delivering service to the public with the introduction of the Social Security Administration's (SSA's) National 800 Number Network. This toll-free system allows one of the nearly 3,900 teleservice representatives (TSRs) in our 36 teleservice centers (TSCs) to answer calls from anywhere in the country. Since implementation of the National 800 Number Network, the public has indicated an increasing desire to use the telephone to conduct business with Social Security. As a result, the national 800 number has become the first point of contact for a large percentage of SSA's customers.

Results of studies conducted by the Agency reflect the popularity of the National 800 Number Network service. Recent responses to survey questions indicate that 84 percent of callers rate the service they receive from teleservice employees as good, very good or excellent, and a large majority of callers indicate that when doing business with SSA again, they will call the national 800 number first. Additionally, SSA's customers who use the 800 number consistently report that they receive courteous service.

In connection with the Vice-President's National Performance Review, in 1997, the Agency established an access rate goal that 95 percent of callers will get through to the National 800 Number Network within 5 minutes of their first attempt. The Agency has met the 95 percent goal for all years since it was established. Achieving the goal requires accurate forecasting of National 800 Number Network call volumes and the correct scheduling of call answering resources.

While public demand for telephone service has been increasing, there has not been an increase in TSC call answering resources since the mid-90s. As result, TSC staff alone have not been able to handle the increasing call volumes, and additional resources from other Agency components were needed to assist with answering national 800 number calls on busy days. For example, on days when heavy call volumes are anticipated, Program Service Center (PSC) and Office of Central Operations (OCO) personnel, known as SPIKEs, are brought on the phones to supplement TSC call answering resources. Currently, the national SPIKE cadre is comprised of approximately 3,200 PSC and OCO employees. SPIKE employees handled 24.6 percent of the National 800 Number Network calls in fiscal year (FY) 1999.

When SPIKE employees answer National 800 Number Network calls, it impacts on PSC pending workloads. To reduce this impact, a number of short-term initiatives have been developed to expand the National 800 Number Network call answering capacity in a manner that will provide PSC employees more time to work on pending workloads, without sacrificing the level of service provided to the public.

While this report focuses on the National 800 Number Network, we are also taking steps to improve field office (FO) telephone service. SSA is in the process of installing modern telephone systems with automated attendant and voice mail in FOs to improve service and access for callers to local offices. Installation of the new equipment will be

completed in all of the approximately 1,300 FOs by the end of December 1999. The new equipment provides callers with access to automated services and/or employee voice mailboxes 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, reducing the need to call during business hours. This will improve customer service by providing recorded information that answers many frequently asked questions regarding office location, directions and hours of service. It also gives callers the capability to direct their calls to the appropriate employee and allows callers to leave voice mail messages. Callers are also advised of the availability of toll-free service on SSA's national 800 number.

ACHIEVING THE AGENCY'S WORLD-CLASS SERVICE GOAL

The public's preference for doing business over the telephone has grown steadily over the years. In FY 1999, for example, over 58 million calls were handled by the National 800 Number Network, an increase of over 4 million calls from FY 1998. This makes SSA's national 800 number operation one of the world's largest 800 number networks. Additionally, the customer's first impression of service is usually profound. SSA's annual customer satisfaction surveys have consistently shown that our customers' perception of all other aspects of service is influenced by their ability to get through to the National 800 Number Network on their first attempt. As a result, meeting the 95 percent access goal has become a cornerstone to achieving world-class service.

Achieving and sustaining the Agency's world-class service goal has been an ongoing process. Below is a brief description of initiatives that have been implemented since 1989 that have had a positive impact on National 800 Number Network service.

- 1989: Began offering automated services over the National 800 Number Network.
- 1989: First mega-site TSC opened.
- 1994-1995: Remissioned the Salinas and Albuquerque Data Operations Centers to TSCs.
- 1995: Began hiring new part-time TSRs using a "mixed" tour of duty.
- 1996: Enhanced the automated system to provide automated service options on the National 800 Number Network to 100 percent of the nation.
- 1996: Completed implementation of "voice recognition" capability to provide automated services to rotary callers.
- 1996: Added "replacement Medicare Card" automated service option to the network.
- 1997-1998: For approximately 50 percent of the nation, implemented Spanish automated services and direct routing to Spanish speaking agents for those callers to the National 800 Number Network who wish to speak in Spanish.

- 1997-1998: Increased the number of bi-lingual TSRs to the current level of approximately 700 agents.
- 1998: Implemented five new automated service options to handle the increased SSA initiated Social Security Statement mailings for FY 1999 and later years.
- 1998: Began phased-in implementation of “Immediate Claims Taking” Pilot, which allows callers to file their claim immediately over the telephone.
- 1998: Added a new pamphlet, “Future of Social Security” which provides information on the solvency of Social Security, as an automated service option.
- 1999: Implemented “next available agent” call routing software, which allows for more efficient routing of calls and utilization of staff resources.
- 1999: Implemented a computer based “Customer Help and Information Program” that assists agents in handling telephone calls more accurately and completely.

PERFORMANCE TO DATE

Service Statistics

The ongoing improvements to the National 800 Number Network described above have had a positive impact on our ability to serve our customers. A review of the call statistics over the last several years (see Appendix 1) shows that the number of calls received by the National 800 Number Network has steadily increased. The increase in received calls means that more and more people are reaching an SSA teleservice center or one of our automated options instead of encountering a busy signal. Despite these increases, the Agency has been able to meet our 5 minute access rate goal of 95 percent (95 percent of callers will get through and not encounter a busy signal within 5 minutes of their first attempt) in each of the last three years.

Additionally, the number of calls served (i.e., handled by our answering agents or automated services) in FY 1999 increased by 3.3 millions calls compared to FY 1997. About half of the increase in calls served were via our answering agents and half via our automated services. In FY 1999, about 23 percent of the over 58 million calls we handled were through our automated services, and 77 percent with agents. The over 58 million calls we took equates to an average of approximately 236,000 calls each workday.

Customer Survey

The results of our most recent national 800 number customer survey reflect the perceptions and opinions of 1,220 individuals who called SSA's 800 number service during February 1999 (see Appendix 2).

The questionnaire for this survey has been fine-tuned to reflect its role as one aspect of SSA's new Market Measurement Program interaction tracking. Interaction tracking includes brief surveys of customers shortly after an SSA contact via telephone (both 800 number and field office), in-office visit, and Internet to obtain current impressions of service. The results from all the interaction tracking surveys will be aggregated to update the Agency's performance measures on customer satisfaction.

At 84 percent, the overall satisfaction rating (respondents rating service overall as "excellent," "very good" or "good") increased slightly from the August 1998 and February 1998 ratings, both 83 percent, and is only one-percentage point short of the FY 1999 goal. The 33 percent "excellent" rating meets the FY 1999 goal. Ratings for specific aspects of service were all high at 87 to 90 percent, with the exception of access to service, which received a rating of 78 percent.

When asked about their experience reaching SSA, 41 percent of all callers said they had tried to call earlier in the day when the lines were busy. About a third of these callers had tried to call three or more times. Over half (59 percent) of the callers who chose to speak with a representative said they were placed on hold.

Analysis shows that quick access to service correlates with high ratings for all other aspects of service, and that complete call handling has a major effect on satisfaction. For callers who got through right away and whose business was handled completely, the overall satisfaction rating is 98 percent. Ratings fall by 25- to 37-percentage points if the caller's issue is not handled completely. Fifty-nine percent of callers who used an automated service and 77 percent of callers who spoke to a representative said their business was handled completely.

STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE 800 NUMBER RESOURCE AND PSC WORKLOAD BALANCE

Background

The rate at which calls come into the National 800 Number Network varies by day, week and month. The busiest day is Monday or the day following a holiday, with the number of calls decreasing throughout the week. The first week of the month is the busiest, with the number of calls decreasing weekly throughout the month. While call volumes are heavy throughout the year, the network is generally busier the first three months of the calendar year.

Each teleservice workday is categorized as a level 1, 2, 3 or 4 day for SPIKE involvement. The level of operation for a particular workday is established in advance based on the projected call volume for that day. The more calls that are anticipated, the more SPIKEs need to be available to answer National 800 Number Network calls.

The level 1 schedule of operation is designated for days when the highest call volumes are anticipated. Approximately 80 percent of the PSC SPIKE cadre is required to answer National 800 Number Network calls for 5 ½ hours on level 1 days. There were 44 level 1 days in FY 1999. Approximately 40 percent are required to answer National 800 Number Network calls for 5 ½ hours on level 2 days and approximately 20 percent are required to answer National 800 Number Network calls for 5 ½ hours on level 4 days. No PSC SPIKEs are required on level 3 days.

The Agency recognizes that using PSC personnel as SPIKEs adversely affects PSC pending workloads. These workloads include the processing of claims, mailing out notices, and managing the Agency's debt collection activities. In recent years, helping TSCs answer 800 number calls has become a major workload for the PSCs. As a result, there is a need to properly balance answering national 800 number calls and processing traditional PSC workloads. On an ongoing basis, we look at ways to reduce the amount of time SPIKEs are needed to answer calls so they can devote more time to process their other workloads. The initiatives outlined below will have an important impact on reducing SPIKE telephone time.

Initiatives Overview

The short-term initiatives in this paper reaffirm the Agency's commitment to achieve its world-class service goal and represent proactive steps toward responding to SSA's customer needs and expectations.

These actions will also help SSA:

- Sustain the access rate goal that 95 percent of callers will get through to SSA's National 800 Number Network within 5 minutes of their first attempt;
- Mitigate the impact of SPIKING on PSC pending workloads; and
- Utilize technology to the maximum extent to enhance our service delivery infrastructure.

Call Answering Capacity Initiatives

The following short-term initiatives should have a positive impact on the National 800 Number Network's call answering capacity and will help to absorb the increase in calls generated from special events and normal network growth. Special events include calls that may be generated by concerns over the potential impact of the forthcoming change to the year 2000 (commonly referred to as the Y2K issue) and the Social Security Statement mailings. Starting October 1999 the Agency began mailing 125 million Social Security Statements (500,000 each business day) to all workers age 25 and older who are not receiving benefits. These short-term initiatives are reflective of the Agency's efforts to sustain the access goal that 95 percent of customers will reach SSA within 5 minutes of their first attempt.

- In addition to replacing the TSRs who retired in 1999, an additional 60 TSRs were recently hired. This will result in a net increase in the number of TSRs available on the network.
- Mixed-tour TSRs are part-time employees who work full-time in the second quarter of the fiscal year (i.e., January through March). In October 1999, on a voluntary basis, the full-time segment of the mixed-tour TSRs' tour of duty was increased to include both the first and second quarters (October - March). This will effectively add 55 work-years to the TSC network commitment.
- The Technical Support Technician (TST) position was recently established in the PSCs. It combines the duties of the Check Claims and Recovery Examiner and Contact Specialist positions with the full range of duties for the GS-7 TSR, including calls concerning the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program. TSTs will spend at least 50 percent of their time on 800 number telephone work. About 200 positions will be filled by December 1999. The number of positions should increase substantially by FY 2001. This initiative will help to improve customer service by adding staff who can answer the full-range of National 800 Number Network calls. It will also help with traditional PSC workloads by reducing the number of benefit authorizers on the phones in the PSCs. In addition, it will reduce the number of instances where lesser trained SPIKEs must "hand-off" calls to fully trained SPIKEs; e.g., calls involving SSI issues.
- In OCO, the Division of Earnings Record Operations (DERO) has Benefit Earnings Technicians (BETs) who are trained as SPIKEs. Beginning in fiscal year 2000, approximately 200 of these BETs will be converted to Customer Service Technicians (CSTs). The number of CSTs will increase to about 400 by October 2000. The CSTs will spend 75 percent of their time handling the full range of 800 number calls. The remaining 25 percent of their time will be spent processing a specific earnings workload.
- A SPIKE cadre will be established in the Wilkes-Barre Data Operations Center (WBDOC) by October 2000 and eventually will increase in size to about 300 CSTs.

Use of Technology Initiatives

These initiatives begin the Agency's focus on the use of technology to expand its service delivery infrastructure. Through technological enhancements, customer service will be further improved and the number of SPIKE employees needed to support the National 800 Number Network will be reduced. In addition, SSA will be able to manage call delivery better and direct calls to the agents with the skills to answer the callers' questions.

- Accurate call volume projections are crucial to efficient teleservice operations. Although SSA already does an excellent job of predicting call volumes, technology

is being procured that will enable SSA to more accurately forecast call demands. It will also help to maximize the efficient utilization of the answering agent resources.

- Acquire and install new telephone equipment; i.e., automatic call distributors (ACDs) with Intelligent Network Routing (INR) capability. INR will allow dynamic routing of National 800 Number Network calls to available agents before creating a queue, thus increasing SSA's call answering capability. Therefore, INR will route a call to the next available representative, no matter where that representative is located. This will result in a more efficient network and will balance out the call workloads among the answering sites. The ACD acquisition will be implemented on a phased-in basis beginning June 2000 with completion by December 2001.
- Increase the use of automation in handling customer services in the National 800 Number Network. Currently, automation is limited to voice mail types of applications. For example, now callers leave a name/address for SSA to mail the appropriate form. Planning is underway to expand our automation technology infrastructure to provide callers additional services.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Implementing all of the initiatives described above will have a positive impact on customer service, the Agency, and our employees.

Specifically, these initiatives will allow us to maintain our commitment to provide 95 percent of our callers access to service within 5 minutes (95/5 goal). This has been, and will continue to be, a stretch goal for the Agency as call volumes continue to increase. Maintaining the 95/5 goal means we should handle about 2 million additional calls over the next 2-3 years while at the same time reducing our PSC SPIKE commitment. Over this timeframe, we expect our 800 number customer satisfaction goal to remain at or above 85 percent.

With regard to PSC workloads, over time the initiatives will reduce the number of items awaiting action in the PSCs with commensurate customer service improvements. Unfortunately, the high volume of work arriving at the PSCs, constrained fiscal resources, and the length of time it will take to put all the initiatives into place will mean that pending workloads will still grow substantially in FY 2000, and then begin to decline in FY 2001, returning to present levels in FY 2002. In terms of customer service, this means, for example, that the time it takes for the recomputation of benefits for current beneficiaries, and for making earnings records changes for current workers will be reduced in FY 2002 by up to several weeks.

There will be improvements in customer service because:

- ◆ Additional telephone coverage will be available on all workdays;

- ◆ Having more call answering staff who are fully trained will result in fewer calls being transferred among SPIKEs/TSRs, which will reduce call handle time;
- ◆ More callers will have their calls handled to completion by the agent who initially answers the call;
- ◆ The new technology will result in improved access, which has a significant impact on caller satisfaction; and
- ◆ Reducing SPIKE usage in the PSCs will allow employees more time to devote to processing traditional PSC workloads and reducing backlogs.

There will be a positive impact on the Agency and the employees because:

- ◆ Establishing new positions in the PSCs and OCO (including WBDOC) provides promotional opportunities and broadens skill development for hundreds of employees;
- ◆ Increasing the tour of duty of the mixed tour TSRs will result in financial incentives for those employees; and
- ◆ There will be cost savings when the new technology is installed (calls will be handled more efficiently, so the Agency will not pay as much for callers to wait on hold to speak to an available agent).

These short-term initiatives are an important part of SSA's efforts to improve the National 800 Number Network. They will make it more responsive to the needs of our customers, and will both improve call handling efficiency and have a positive impact on PSC workloads. They are, however, designed only to maintain current levels of customer service for the next few years. In order to address future challenges, longer-term approaches will be needed, and the Agency has begun a planning effort designed to create its vision for service in 2010. The results of this effort will be presented in late FY 2000.

Appendix 1

National 800 Number Service Statistics

National 800 Number Service Statistics

Call Volumes (Millions)	1997	1998	1999	2000		2001		2002	
				Without Initiatives	With Initiatives	Without Initiatives	With Initiatives	Without Initiatives	With Initiatives
Calls Received	68.4	70.5	71.8	73.9	73.9	73.7	73.7	73.8	73.8
Total Calls Served	55.5	54.7	58.8	59.9	60.9	59.7	61.5	59.8	62.0
by Automation	12.2	13.5	13.8	13.9	13.9	14.0	14.0	14.2	14.2
by Agents	43.3	41.2	45.0	46.0	47.0	45.7	47.5	45.6	47.8

Definitions

Calls Received by: The number of calls that reached a teleservice center or automated site.

Calls Served by: The number of calls handled by an SSA representative or automated service.

Calls Served by Agents: The number of calls handled by SSA representatives.

Calls Served by Automation: The number of calls using automated services.

Appendix 2

National 800 Number Customer Survey
February 1999

**800 NUMBER CUSTOMER SURVEY
FOR
FEBRUARY 1999**



Office of Finance, Assessment and Management

**Office of Quality Assurance and
Performance Assessment**

July 1999

800 NUMBER CUSTOMER SURVEY
FEBRUARY 1999

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800 NUMBER CUSTOMER SURVEY FOR FEBRUARY 1999

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of an ongoing evaluation of SSA's 800 number service, the Office of Quality Assurance and Performance Assessment conducts a semiannual customer satisfaction survey. The questionnaire was recently redesigned to reflect the survey's purpose as one element of SSA's new Market Measurement Program (MMP), with a focus on customers' ratings of service using a six-point, "world-class," rating scale. Although modified, the survey still provides data comparable to earlier 800 number caller recontact surveys, particularly with respect to the caller's actual experience. Where possible, comparisons with the results from the previous three surveys are presented in this report. The results for this survey reflect the perceptions and opinions of 1,220 customers who called the 800 number service in February 1999.

- **Service ratings:** Eighty-four percent of the survey respondents rated the 800 number service on the day of their call as "excellent," "very good" or "good" overall. This overall satisfaction rating is up slightly from the August 1998 and February 1998 ratings, both 83 percent, and is just 1-percentage point short of SSA's fiscal year (FY) 1999 goal of 85 percent. The 33 percent "excellent" rating is the same as for August 1998, and meets the FY 1999 goal. The satisfaction ratings for specific aspects of service ranged from 87 to 90 percent for employee attributes to 78 percent for access to service.
- **Customer segment:** The MMP calls for analyzing survey data by segments reflecting the type of business customers have with SSA. Customers are divided into six primary segments: Enumeration (Social Security number (SSN) or card-SSN); Earnings/**Personal Earnings and Benefit Estimate Statement; Claims; Appeals;** Postentitlement (PE); and **General Inquiry.** Claims and PE are further broken out by program: Retirement and survivors insurance, disability insurance (DI) and **supplemental security income.** Overall satisfaction ratings by customer segment and program range from 93 percent for DI PE to 74 percent for Appeals.
- **Access:** When asked about their experience getting through to SSA, 41 percent of all callers said they had tried to

call earlier in the day when the lines were busy. About a third of these callers had tried to call three or more times. (These results cannot be compared to the results for similar questions on previous surveys, since the earlier surveys asked separate questions to distinguish between callers who heard a busy *signal* and those who heard a recorded *message* that all lines were busy.) Over half (59 percent) of the callers who chose to speak with a representative said they were placed on hold.

As seen in other customer satisfaction surveys, quick access to service correlates with higher ratings for all other aspects of service.

- **Complete call handling:** Complete call handling has a profound effect on satisfaction. Virtually all callers (98 percent) were satisfied with service overall if they did not have to wait on hold or call back because the lines were busy, **and** their business was handled completely by the automated service or the representative. Ratings fall drastically if the caller's issue is not handled completely. Of the callers who used an automated service, 59 percent said it handled their issue completely. While this is a significant decrease from 73 percent in August 1998, the results for the last four surveys suggest a seasonal pattern (i.e., significantly higher completion rates in August than in February). About 77 percent of the callers who spoke to a representative said the employee handled the matter completely. This is the same rate as in the February 1998 survey and slightly less than the August 1998 rate of 79 percent.
- **Preference for future SSA contact:** Results from recent surveys show several trends: A small but increasing preference for calling the 800 number (from 70 percent to 73 percent), and a declining preference for calling a local office (from 21 percent to 14 percent). However, preference for visiting a local office has doubled over the same time period, from 5 percent to 11 percent. Not surprisingly, the higher the access rating, the more likely callers are to prefer calling the 800 number again.

800 NUMBER CUSTOMER SURVEY REPORT

FEBRUARY 1999

BACKGROUND

Since 1989, the Office of Quality Assurance and Performance Assessment (OQA) has conducted periodic surveys of customers who call SSA's 800 number, to assess their satisfaction with SSA's service. The survey is conducted semiannually and was recently redesigned to reflect its purpose as one element of SSA's new Market Measurement Program (MMP). This report presents the results of the February 1999 survey, which is the first to use the redesigned questionnaire.

The MMP is an integrated plan for obtaining data on SSA's customers, employees and stakeholders to support Agency planning and decisionmaking. One aspect of MMP, **interaction tracking**, entails brief surveys of customers shortly after an SSA contact, focused on the aspects of service known to be important to them to obtain current impressions of service. Interaction tracking surveys with 800 number callers, field office callers, and office visitors serve as one of the primary mechanisms for monitoring and reporting on SSA's customer service performance. The results for the 800 Number Customer Survey, along with those for other interaction tracking surveys, will be used to measure progress toward the Agency's performance goals.

The redesigned questionnaire focuses on customers' ratings of service using a six-point, "world-class," rating scale. While the changes in the questionnaire have resulted in some loss of comparability to previous surveys, comparable data exist for many questions, especially those concerning the caller's actual service experience. Where possible, comparisons with the results from the previous three surveys are presented in this report. Tab A, which contains a question-by-question breakout of responses to the current survey, displays the previous results for all questions for which comparable data exist.

Participants for the 800 Number Customer Survey are randomly selected from electronic files containing records of incoming calls to SSA's national 800 number during the survey period. These callers may have talked with a teleservice representative, listened to an automated message or hung up while in queue. Since the caller's name is not available, interviewers call the originating telephone number and attempt

to identify, contact and interview the person who placed the sample call. The survey attempts to contact individuals within 3 days to a week of their call to the 800 number. Since August 1997, the interviews have been conducted by employees of Management Research and Planning (MRP), Inc., a private company under contract with OQA.

The findings in this report are based on responses obtained through interviews with individuals who reached the 800 number service during February 1999. By completing 1,220 interviews, MRP achieved a 65 percent response rate, after adjusting the sample size to include only calls originating from household telephones. Calls were excluded when they originated from a public or business telephone since, generally, the individual who called the 800 number could not be identified. Calls were also excluded when they came from a telephone number that was disconnected at the time the survey was attempted. (The response rate for previous surveys was calculated without excluding these callers - see tab B for more details.) Nonrespondents either declined to participate in the survey or could not be interviewed for some other reason. Nonrespondents, had they been successfully contacted, might have answered the questions differently from the individuals who participated in the survey.

Survey data reflect callers' perceptions and opinions of SSA's service as well as their preferences for future contacts with the Agency. The following discussion highlights the most notable findings from the February 1999 survey. Differences in survey results are statistically significant, at the 95-percent confidence level, only when specifically indicated. Tab B describes technical aspects of the survey including sampling methodology, statistical computations and reasons for nonresponse. Since not all questions applied to all callers, the percentages shown are based on the number of respondents for each question unless otherwise indicated.

Service Ratings

The Agency's "world-class" six-point scale now used for customers' ratings of service was introduced in the February 1998 survey for the overall service rating and in February 1999 for specific ratings of service (e.g., employee courtesy). The six-point scale offers ratings of "excellent," "very good," "good," "fair," "poor" and "very poor." Previous surveys were based on a five-point rating scale. As a result, overall satisfaction ratings for surveys conducted prior to

February 1998 cannot be compared to those for February 1998 and continuing. Likewise, this survey establishes a new baseline for ratings of specific aspects of service. **Throughout the report, the "satisfaction rating" refers to the combined percentage of respondents rating service as "excellent," "very good" or "good."**

Ratings and performance goal--An 84 percent overall satisfaction rating for SSA's service on the day of the sample call shows a slight increase compared to the February and August 1998 ratings, both 83 percent. This rating is 1-percentage point short of the Agency's goal of 85 percent for fiscal year (FY) 1999.¹ The rating of "excellent" given by 33 percent of the February 1999 callers meets the FY 1999 goal. This high "excellent" rating has been sustained since August 1998 and reflects a significant increase compared to 23 percent in February 1998. Ratings for specific aspects of service attributable to employees were high at 88 or 90 percent. The lowest rating, at 78 percent, was for access to service.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Performance Indicator	800# Customer Rating February 1999
Overall Service	84%
Overall Service-- "Excellent" Rating	33%
Employee Courtesy	90%
Employee Job Knowledge	90%
Employee Helpfulness	89%
Clear Explanations	87%
Access to Service	78%

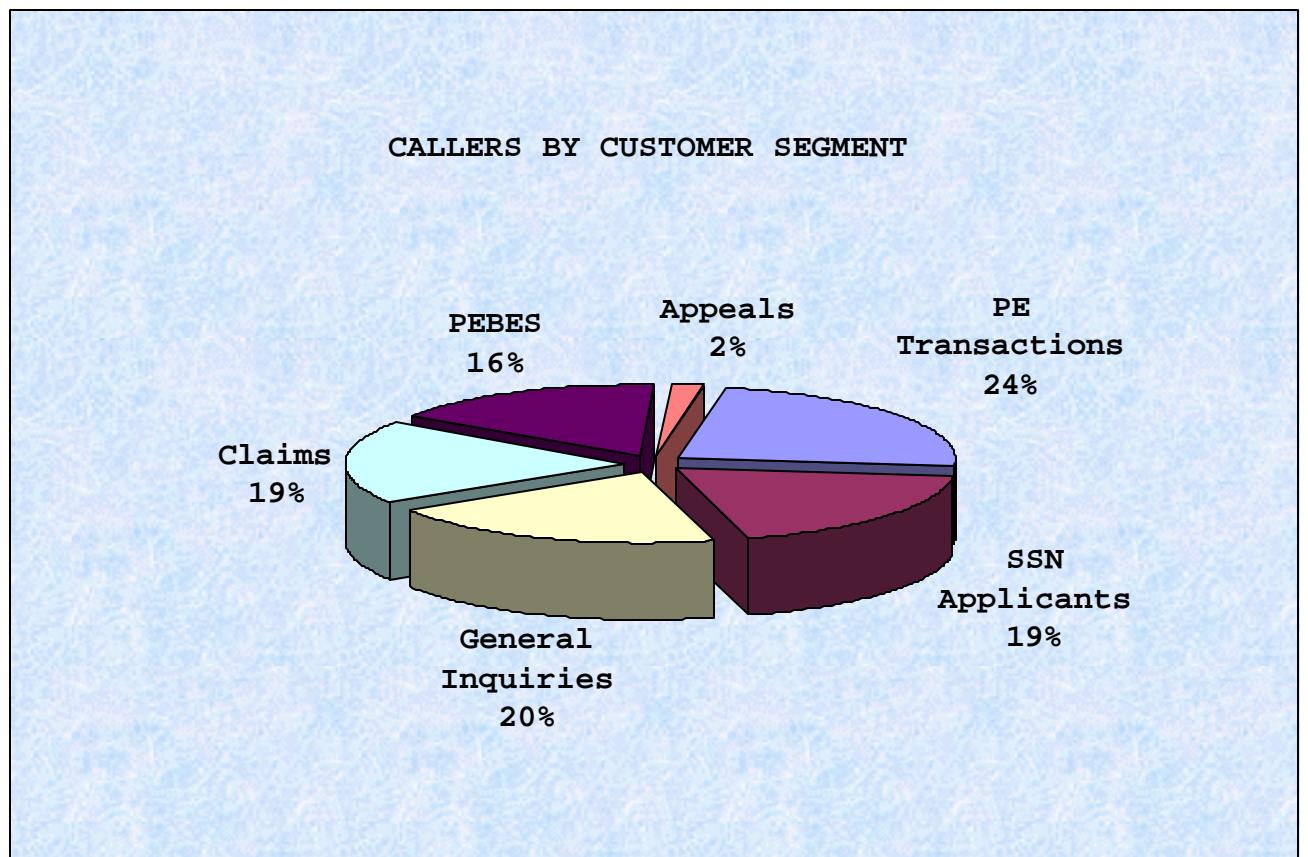
Comments on overall ratings--Callers who rated service as excellent were asked what they liked best. The number one

¹ Customer satisfaction goals apply to all types of SSA service, not just that provided via the 800 number. These results will be combined with the results for other surveys to report on SSA's performance.

answer related to receiving fast and efficient service (cited by over one-fourth of these respondents), followed by the fact that the matter was handled completely and the high level of employee courtesy (both about 20 percent). (Some respondents mentioned multiple features.)

Callers who rated service as very good or good were asked what SSA would have to change before they would rate the 800 number service as excellent. Interestingly, well over one-third of these respondents either had no comment or indicated that they did not know. About one-fourth of these respondents suggested that SSA provide faster service and/or or hire more representatives, and a little more than 10 percent indicated SSA should change or get rid of the automated service. Three respondents said they just never give ratings of "excellent."

Customer Segment Information



The MMP calls for segmenting and analyzing survey data according to the type of business that customers have with SSA, in order to identify and address a customer segment's specific service needs. The MMP categorizes customers according to program and by the following six types of business: Enumeration (Social Security number or card--**SSN Applicants**), Earnings/Personal Earnings and Benefit Estimate Statement (**PEBES**), **Claims**, **Appeals**,

Postentitlement (**PE**) Transactions and **General Inquiries**. While detailed information about each segment will be obtained through another key element of the MMP--customer segment analysis--the results for this survey may be analyzed by customer segment.

Claims and PE are further broken out by program: Retirement and survivors insurance (**RSI**), disability insurance (**DI**) and supplemental security income (**SSI**), for a total of 10 customer groups. The following chart shows the overall satisfaction rating for each group (determined by asking callers their reasons for contacting SSA). The satisfaction ratings should be interpreted with caution because of the small sample size involved. Although the ratings range from 93 percent to 74 percent, only the differences at the highest and lowest ends of the ratings are potentially significant, due to the small size of the groups. (Note: OQA is not able to stratify the 800 number universe prior to sample selection, since the only information we have for the universe is the incoming telephone number and not the reason for the call.)

Overall Satisfaction by Customer Segment and Program

Customer Segment	Overall Satisfaction Rating	Number of Sample Cases
DI PE	93%	49
RSI PE	90%	88
RSI Claims	90%	71
SSI Claims	87%	38
PEBES	87%	195

SSN	85%	227
DI Claims	83%	77
General Inquiry	79%*	238
SSI PE	75%*	45
Appeals	74%*	20

* Statistically significantly lower at the 95-percent confidence level than satisfaction of the top rated customer segment.

Access to Service

Experience getting through--Several survey questions relate to the caller's experience in reaching the 800 number service. Forty-one percent of all callers said they had tried to call earlier in the day when the lines were busy. Over a third of those who had called earlier (35 percent) had tried to call three or more times. (Previous surveys solicited a greater level of detail about whether callers heard a busy signal and/or heard a message that all lines were busy after asking to speak to a representative. The new wording for the redesigned questionnaire does not permit comparisons with previous surveys for these questions.)

Fifty-nine percent of the callers who chose to speak with a representative said they were placed on hold, a significant increase compared to the August 1998 rate of 46 percent, but consistent with February 1998 and August 1997 (58 percent and 55 percent, respectively). Nine percent of these callers hung up before speaking to a representative. While about half of those who hung up while on hold chose to call the 800 number again later to complete their business with SSA, 38 percent decided to call or visit a local office.

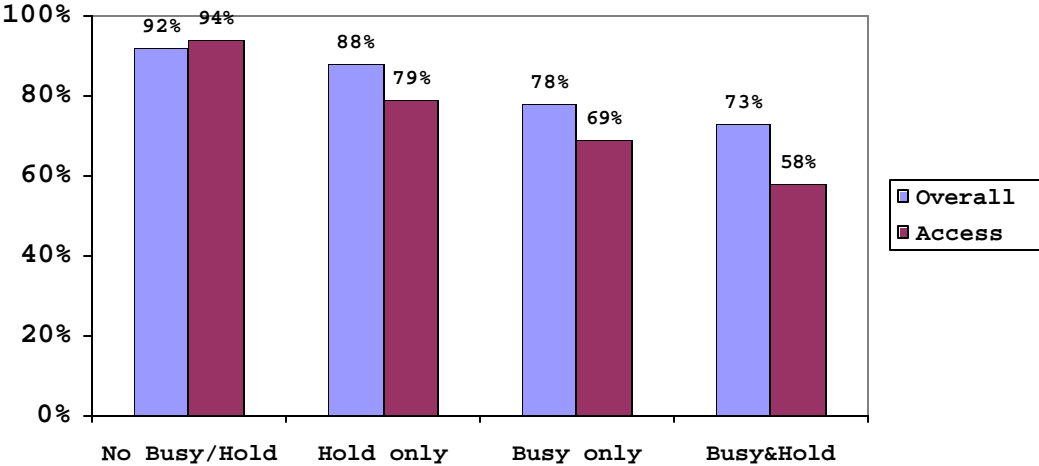
Access and satisfaction--We analyzed callers' satisfaction ratings for access and overall service according to the various experiences that may have contributed to perceptions of access. Some callers had tried to call earlier in the day when the lines were busy, some were placed on hold, and some experienced both, or neither, of these events. The following chart shows that satisfaction is high at 92 percent for service overall and 94 percent for access for callers who get through right away. It falls to 73 percent and 58 percent, respectively, when callers experience both a busy signal/message and time waiting on hold. The satisfaction of callers who waited on hold falls between those who got through right away and those who had to call back because the lines were busy.

The chart also illustrates the effect of access on overall satisfaction: As the access rating goes down, the overall satisfaction rating declines as well. In analyzing the survey results, we also found that quick access to service correlates with higher ratings for all other aspects of service. As the access rating declines from "excellent" to "very poor," the other service ratings decline, even for aspects of service seemingly unrelated to access, like courtesy and job

knowledge.

This effect of access on other ratings has been observed in other customer surveys.

SATISFACTION RATINGS BY EXPERIENCE "GETTING THROUGH"

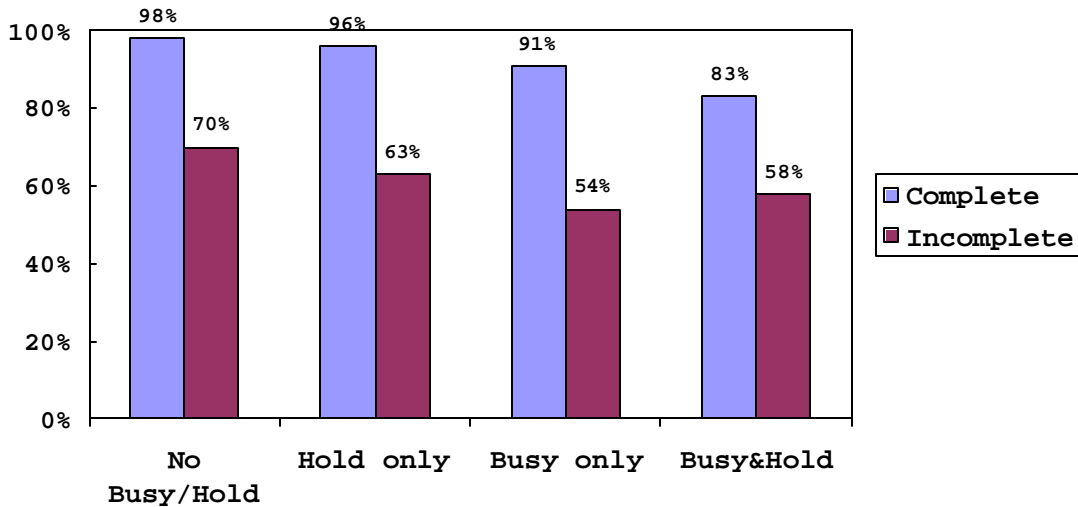


Complete Call Handling

Complete call handling has a profound effect on the overall satisfaction rating. Earlier in this report, we discussed the relationship between the caller's ability to access the 800 number service and satisfaction with the service. As shown by the following chart, 98 percent of callers who got through right away **and** whose call issue was handled completely, either by an automated service or a representative, are satisfied with service overall. When callers have to call more than once and are unable to complete their business during the call, the satisfaction rating drops to less than 60 percent. The difference between complete and incomplete call handling is between 25- and 37-percentage points in the overall satisfaction rating.

[It should be noted that some call issues require multiple contacts with SSA and cannot be handled by a single call to the 800 number. Also, some issues requiring multiple contacts are adverse in nature, which we know from previous surveys may negatively affect the satisfaction rating, independent of the level of service provided.]

EFFECT OF COMPLETE CALL HANDLING ON SATISFACTION



Caller Used Automated Services

Stable usage--The percentage of callers using automated services has remained stable over the last three surveys at 25 to 26 percent. Also consistent with prior surveys, the most popular options are obtaining or replacing a Social Security card (37 percent) and obtaining information about earnings and future Social Security benefits (30 percent).

Complete handling--Overall, 59 percent of callers who used an automated service said it handled their matter completely. This was a significant decrease from 73 percent in August 1998. However, the results for the two previous surveys suggest a seasonal pattern, since 61 percent of respondents in February 1998 and 75 percent in August 1997 said their matter was handled completely. However, no seasonal pattern is evident in the reported usage of the various automated services. Callers who said their issues were handled completely by the automated service had an overall satisfaction rating of 93 percent.

Of the callers whose issues were not handled completely by the automated services, half (51 percent) chose to call the 800 number again, but over a third (36 percent) decided to call or visit a local Social Security office. (This is the same pattern seen for callers who hung up while waiting on hold.)

As shown by the following table, reports of complete call handling ranged from 68 to 35 percent, depending on which automated service was used.

AUTOMATED SERVICE CALLS HANDLED COMPLETELY

Automated Service Used	Calls Handled Completely
Local Office Information	68%
PEBES	67%
SSN	59%
Benefit Verification	55%
Medicare	35%

Reasons for not using automated services--As in past surveys, the overwhelming majority (91 percent) of callers who preferred to speak to a representative provided the same two reasons: Either they thought a recording would not answer their questions or they simply wanted to speak to a person rather than listen to a recording.

OQA will conduct a more detailed special study of 800 number automated service later this year to determine why the automated messages did not handle calls to completion.

Caller Spoke to Representative

Complete service--Of callers who spoke with a representative, 76 percent indicated the representative handled the matter completely so that no later contact or action was needed. This is consistent with the results for the three previous surveys. Callers who said their issues were completely handled by the representative gave a satisfaction rating of 94 percent for service overall, one percentage-point more than callers who said their issues were handled completely by the automated service.

CALL ISSUES HANDLED COMPLETELY BY A REPRESENTATIVE

Call Issue:	Calls Handled Completely
Earnings/PEBES	84%
PE Event	83%
SSN/Card	77%
General Inquiry	74%
Appeal	71%
Claim for Benefits	54%

Preference for Future Contact

Trends--Exhibiting a rising trend, 73 percent of respondents said they would call the 800 number the next time they contact Social Security. This was a slight increase over the last three surveys: 72 percent in August 1998 and 70 percent both in February 1998 and August 1997. Fourteen percent of the callers said they would prefer to call the local Social Security office, a significant decrease and a declining trend compared to 19 percent in August 1998, 20 percent in February 1998 and 21 percent in August 1997. Conversely, the last four surveys show a significant increase and rising trend in callers who prefer to visit a local office, from 5 percent in August 1997 to 11 percent in February 1999.

Not surprisingly, the likelihood of calling the 800 number again declines as the access rating declines. The percentage of callers who say they prefer the 800 number for the next SSA contact falls steadily from 85 percent to 44 percent as the access rating declines from "excellent" to "very poor." Still, the primary reason (35 percent) respondents gave for not calling the 800 number again was that they simply prefer to deal with the local office. Difficulty getting through accounted for a much smaller proportion (16 percent) of the reasons.

800 NUMBER CUSTOMER SURVEY-QUESTION SUMMARY

The following table shows the results for each question of the February 1999 survey, which was revised to align with SSA's new Market Measurement Program (MMP). The new questionnaire has been simplified for ease of administration and uses SSA's "world-class" 6-point rating scale, with a top rating of "excellent," for all service ratings. Another change reflects the MMP requirement to analyze responses by customer segment and program. For all comparable questions, results for the previous three surveys also are displayed. Some of the results for the August 1998 survey may differ slightly from those previously published due to removing responses from business callers.

In addition to the questions shown, respondents for the February 1999 survey were asked a series of questions about how they would define "good service." The results for these questions will be provided in a future Office of Quality Assurance and Performance Assessment report to be used in updating SSA's customer service standards.

OQA 800 Number Customer Survey - Question Summary

TAB A

SURVEY QUESTIONS	RESPONSE	2/99 Percent	8/98 Percent	2/98 Percent	8/97 Percent
SERVICE RATINGS					
All callers: Overall, how would you rate the 800 number service you received that day? Would you say it was:	Excellent	33	33	23	--
	Very good	27	27	33	--
	Good	24	23	27	--
	Fair	8	9	10	--
	Poor	5	5	4	--
	Very poor	3	3	4	--
	Number of respondents	1,208	1,283	1,433	--
All callers: Why did you rate the 800 number service as fair, poor or very poor?	It was too hard to get through/wait time too long	39	--	--	--
	The representative didn't answer the question	19	--	--	--
	The representative was discourteous	9	--	--	--
	Social Security failed to take the requested action/problem not solved	13	--	--	--
	I don't like having to listen to automated messages and pressing numbers	8	--	--	--
	The recording was hard to understand	2	--	--	--
	Something else	11	--	--	--
Number of respondents	189	--	--	--	
All callers: Thinking about your call to the 800 number on _____, would you rate how quickly you got through as:	Excellent	27	--	--	--
	Very good	26	--	--	--
	Good	25	--	--	--
	Fair	13	--	--	--
	Poor	5	--	--	--
	Very poor	4	--	--	--
	Number of respondents	1,204	--	--	--

OQA 800 Number Customer Survey - Question Summary

TAB A

SURVEY QUESTIONS	RESPONSE	2/99	8/98	2/98	8/97
		Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
Callers that spoke to a representative: Thinking about the level of courtesy provided by the representative you spoke with that day, was it:	Excellent	46	--	--	--
	Very good	26	--	--	--
	Good	18	--	--	--
	Fair	5	--	--	--
	Poor	2	--	--	--
	Very poor	3	--	--	--
	Number of respondents	849	--	--	--
Callers that spoke to a representative: How well would you say the representative knew his or her job? Was it:	Excellent	43	--	--	--
	Very good	28	--	--	--
	Good	19	--	--	--
	Fair	5	--	--	--
	Poor	3	--	--	--
	Very poor	2	--	--	--
	Number of respondents	848	--	--	--
Callers that spoke to a representative: How would you rate the helpfulness of the representative that day? Was it:	Excellent	44	--	--	--
	Very good	25	--	--	--
	Good	20	--	--	--
	Fair	5	--	--	--
	Poor	2	--	--	--
	Very poor	3	--	--	--
	Number of respondents	849	--	--	--

OQA 800 Number Customer Survey - Question Summary

TAB A

SURVEY QUESTIONS	RESPONSE	2/99	8/98	2/98	8/97
		Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
Callers that spoke to a representative: How clear were the explanations you were given? Would you say they were:	Excellent	42	--	--	--
	Very good	26	--	--	--
	Good	20	--	--	--
	Fair	6	--	--	--
	Poor	2	--	--	--
	Very poor	4	--	--	--
	Number of respondents	847	--	--	--
ACCESS					
Did you call earlier that day and receive a busy signal or a recording that all lines were busy and to call back later?	Yes	41	--	--	--
	No	59	--	--	--
	Number of respondents	1,037	--	--	--
How many times did you call that day and receive a busy signal or a recording that all lines were busy and to call back later?	1 time	26	--	--	--
	2 times	39	--	--	--
	3 times	19	--	--	--
	4 times	6	--	--	--
	5 times	3	--	--	--
	More than 5 times	7	--	--	--
	Number of respondents	407	--	--	--

OQA 800 Number Customer Survey - Question Summary

TAB A

SURVEY QUESTIONS	RESPONSE	2/99 Percent	8/98 Percent	2/98 Percent	8/97 Percent
AUTOMATED SERVICE					
Callers who used:	Automated service	26	25	26	31
	Number of respondents	321	309	376	382
Which automated service did you select?	Obtain or replace a Social Security card	37	37	29	35
	Information about your earnings and future Social Security benefits	30	26	26	30
	Proof of current payments	12	13	13	12
	Medicare information or a replacement Medicare card	6	5	8	8
	The address and working hours of your nearest office	16	19	25	14
	Number of respondents	321	309	376	382
Thinking about the automated service you used that day, did the message handle the reason for your call completely?	Yes	59	73	61	75
	No	37	22	34	21
	Doesn't remember	4	5	5	4
	Number of respondents	321	226	251	259
If no, then what did you do, or what do you plan to do, to complete your business with Social Security? Did you or will you:	Call the 800 number again	51	--	--	--
	Call the local Social Security office	14	--	--	--
	Visit the local Social Security office	21	--	--	--
	Write to Social Security	0	--	--	--
	Send a FAX, email or Internet message	0	--	--	--
	Do something else	4	--	--	--
	Do nothing about it	8	--	--	--
	Number of respondents	117	--	--	--

OQA 800 Number Customer Survey - Question Summary

TAB A

SURVEY QUESTIONS	RESPONSE	2/99 Percent	8/98 Percent	2/98 Percent	8/97 Percent
SPOKE TO A REPRESENTATIVE					
Why did you choose not to use the automated services? Would you say that you:	Wanted to speak to a person rather than listen to an automated message	59	63	60	35
	Didn't think an automated message could answer your question	34	30	36	56
	Couldn't hear or understand the instruction on how to use the message	2	2	1	3
	Found the recordings were not in your preferred language	0	0	0	0
	Had some other reason	4	4	3	6
Number of respondents		825	970	1,057	856
After this, what happened? Were you:	Placed on hold	59	46	58	55
	Connected immediately to a representative	41	54	42	45
	Number of respondents	840	970	1,057	856
After being placed on hold, what did you do?	Hung up	9	9	11	11
	Waited to speak to a representative	91	91	89	89
	Number of respondents	496	443	617	471

OQA 800 Number Customer Survey - Question Summary

TAB A

SURVEY QUESTIONS	RESPONSE	2/99	8/98	2/98	8/97
		Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
After you hung up, what did you do, or what do you plan to do, about your Social Security business? Did you or will you:	Call the 800 number later	48	--	--	--
	Call the local Social Security office	25	--	--	--
	Visit the local Social Security office	13	--	--	--
	Write Social Security	3	--	--	--
	Send a FAX, email or Internet message	0	--	--	--
	Do something else	6	--	--	--
	Do nothing about it	5	--	--	--
	Number of respondents	40	--	--	--
Was the representative able to handle the reason for your call completely so that no further contact was needed?	Yes	77	79	77	80
	No	23	21	23	20
	Number of respondents	842	914	974	789
If no, then what did you do, or what do you plan to do, to complete your business with Social Security? Did you or will you:	Wait for Social Security to contact you or mail you something	26	--	--	--
	Call the 800 number again	22	--	--	--
	Call the local Social Security office	15	--	--	--
	Visit the local Social Security office	19	--	--	--
	Write to Social Security	3	--	--	--
	Send a FAX, email or Internet message	1	--	--	--
	Do something else	9	--	--	--
	Do nothing about it	6	--	--	--
Number of respondents	195	--	--	--	

OQA 800 Number Customer Survey - Question Summary

TAB A

SURVEY QUESTIONS	RESPONSE	2/99 Percent	8/98 Percent	2/98 Percent	8/97 Percent
CUSTOMER SEGMENT INFORMATION					
So we can help Social Security improve its customer service, we'd like to know a little more about why you called the 800 # on _____? Did you call about:	Getting a social security number or replacing a lost, stolen or damaged social security card	19	--	--	--
	Your earnings record or getting an earnings and benefit estimate statement	16	--	--	--
	Applying for benefits or about a claim you had already filed	19	--	--	--
	Filing an appeal of a decision made by Social Security	2	--	--	--
	A change affecting your benefits or checks or a review of your case	24	--	--	--
	Something else (e.g., Benefit Verification, Medicare issue, General information)	20	--	--	--
	Number of respondents	1,196	--	--	--
What kind of benefits were you calling about?	Social Security Retirement or Survivor benefits	36	--	--	--
	Social Security Disability benefits	31	--	--	--
	SSI	20	--	--	--
	Medicare	10	--	--	--
	Medicaid	2	--	--	--
	Other	3	--	--	--
	Number of respondents	456	--	--	--

OQA 800 Number Customer Survey - Question Summary

TAB A

SURVEY QUESTIONS	RESPONSE	2/99 Percent	8/98 Percent	2/98 Percent	8/97 Percent	
SERVICE PREFERENCES						
When you contact Social Security the next time what will you do? Will you:	Call the 800 number	73	72	70	70	
	Call your local Social Security office	14	19	20	21	
	Visit your local Social Security office	11	8	7	5	
	Write	1	0	0	0	
	Send a FAX, email or Internet message	0	1	0	0	
	Do something else	2	1	2	3	
	Number of respondents		1,196	1,281	1,429	1,240
	Why are you unlikely to call the 800 number again?	I get too many busy signals -- it's too hard to get through	16	7	9	18
I have to wait on hold too long		7	6	4	3	
The representatives are not knowledgeable		6	3	3	5	
The information received was not helpful		9	8	6	8	
I don't like conducting business over the phone		6	1	4	4	
I prefer dealing with the local office		35	57	53	40	
It's confusing to cope with many options/menus (Too much "press this"/"press that")		5	7	8	10	
Something else		16	12	12	12	
Number of respondents		321	361	430	366	

B

TECHNICAL APPENDIX**I. Sampling**Overview

The Office of Quality Assurance and Performance Assessment (OQA) selects the 800 Number Customer Survey samples from automatic number identifier (ANI) detail data supplied by AT&T. Sample calls represent individuals who were connected to the 800 number service.

These individuals may have either spoken to a teleservice representative (TSR), been put in queue and hung up before speaking to a TSR, or used the automated network prompt/voice capture services. OQA selects samples twice each week to minimize the time between the sample call and the survey interview. For ease of survey administration, sample calls are separated into "east" and "west" groupings, depending on where in the United States the call originated.

OQA electronically processes the data records for these completed calls and randomly selects the calls for the initial sample. Computer listings of the sample calls are transmitted to Management Research and Planning, Inc. (MRP), the private sector company selected to administer the survey. Using the questionnaire and a randomly sequenced listing of sample telephone numbers provided by OQA, MRP employees call the originating telephone number and attempt to identify and reach the person who placed the sample call. When the original caller is reached, MRP attempts to secure his or her agreement to proceed with the survey interview. The responses from successfully contacted individuals who participate in the survey are stored in a data base for analysis and reporting.

AT&T ANI Detail Data Sampling Methodology

The ANI detail data, which serve as the basis for OQA's sample selection, contain the following information:

- Date of the call;
- Originating telephone number, including area code;
- Length of the call in seconds;
- Hour the call originated, in military time, eastern time zone;

- Disposition of attempt to present call to SSA's network (i.e., completed transfer, busy, blocked at SSA network or other);
- SSA teleservice center communications node to which initial transfer was made; and
- Type of automated service selected.

OQA computer programs process the ANI data to exclude any nonsample period calls and calls from originating telephone numbers from which more than four completed calls were made on any day during the sample week. (Experience has shown that the vast majority of these telephone numbers belong to businesses for which it is virtually impossible to identify a specific caller.) For the remaining calls, the number of completed calls from each originating telephone number are tabulated, and the local hour of the day is determined by using the time zone for the area code to adjust the recorded (eastern) time. Counts of eligible calls are accumulated nationally. An OQA-designed random number generator program, based on selected digits of the current date and time, is used to generate random numbers which, in conjunction with the targeted sample size and records remaining, are used to select the initial sample of calls.

Final Sample and Universe Determination

The sample size is computed based on the number of responses which would be required to assure that a satisfaction rating of 90 percent would have a sampling variability of ± 2 percent at the 95-percent confidence level.

II. Survey Methodology

Blaise, a commercial computer-assisted telephone interviewing software product, is used for survey administration. The survey questions are displayed on each interviewer's personal computer screen, and as callers' responses to questions are entered, they are simultaneously stored in the Blaise data base.

Since August 1997, MRP has administered the survey by telephone using the Blaise questionnaire developed by OQA. Using the sample listings, MRP employees call the originating telephone numbers and attempt to reach the

person who placed the sampled call. To maximize the response rate, OQA requires MRP to call every telephone number on the sample listing and make at least 15 attempts over a 10-day period, alternating between morning, afternoon and evening hours.

Each sample call is either completed or excluded. The survey instrument provides codes for calls that are excluded from the study. MRP transmits the Blaise data base to OQA as each of the sample listings is completed, creating a national data base. The responses from successfully contacted individuals who participate in the survey comprise the data base used for analysis and reporting. Details on completion/exclusion rates for the current survey period are included under Part IV. Completion and Exclusion Rates.

Beginning in February 1999, the survey has used a redesigned questionnaire that reflects the purpose of interaction tracking under SSA's new Market Measurement Program. Interaction tracking is intended to assist SSA in monitoring and reporting on customer service performance. The questionnaire focuses on customers' ratings of service using a six-point, "world-class" rating scale.

III. Analysis and Reporting

OQA staff weight the data received from MRP by sample listing to reflect the number of calls that reached the 800 number during that sample period. The weights for completed survey calls are calculated by dividing the number of completed survey calls into the number of calls reaching the 800 number in each sample period. These weights are applied to each survey call prior to tabulation.

The weighted survey data are compiled and analyzed, and the findings are presented in a report of national findings. The narrative answers to open-ended questions are analyzed by OQA staff in central office.

Statistically Significant Differences

Tests for statistical significance are used in analyzing the results of statistical surveys to determine if differences between responses are "real" or if they could

be due to chance. The calculation takes into account two main variables—the percentage-point difference between two findings and the corresponding number of responses. (Not all questions apply to all respondents to a particular survey, so the number of responses can vary depending on the survey question.) It is possible for a small difference in one comparison to be statistically significant, while a greater percentage difference in another comparison may not be statistically significant because the number of responses is relatively small.

This is illustrated by the following example:

In an earlier survey of 800 number callers, respondents were asked whether the representative was able to handle the matter completely. Of the 1,074 respondents to this question, 80 percent answered "yes." In the previous survey, 76 percent of the 1,152 respondents to that question had given the same answer. The 4 percentage-point difference was statistically significant.

However, of the 21 callers who answered a question about why it was hard to understand the recorded message, 40 percent said the recording gave too many options or went too fast. Of the 9 customers who answered this question in the prior survey, 76 percent had answered it the same way. Even though there was a 36 percentage-point difference, it was not statistically significant.

The influencing variable was the number of respondents in each calculation. The number of callers who answered the question about complete call handling by the representative was considerably greater than the number of customers answering the question about why it was hard to understand the recorded message.

IV. Completion and Exclusion Rates

For the February 1999 survey, MRP employees successfully completed interviews with 1,220 out of 2,597 sample callers. The remaining sample calls were not completed for the following reasons:

Nonresponders

- Three hundred sixty-seven callers did not wish to participate or deliberately exited the interview prematurely.
- For 262 telephone numbers, the person contacted at the sample telephone number said he or she had not called the 800 number and did not know who had.
- Thirteen calls originated from an organization (e.g., a hospital) that requested information about more than one person.
- Nineteen calls were excluded for some other reason.

Out of Scope

- Six hundred nineteen calls originated from a public or business telephone (since, in most cases, callers who placed a specific call from such numbers cannot be identified).
- Ninety-seven callers could not be reached because the telephone at the originating telephone number was disconnected at the time of the survey.

We calculated the response rate by eliminating from the sample the 619 calls from business or public telephones plus the 97 callers who could not be reached because the telephone number was disconnected. The effective sample size becomes 1,881 (2,597 - 716), and the resulting response rate is 65 percent (1220 / 1881).