

Introduction

Keeping in mind the principle of balancing service with limited resources, we designed our Service Delivery Plan (Plan) to be a roadmap for how we will serve the public over the next decade. The Plan explains how we will build on our achievements, accommodate our resource constraints, and achieve the goals and objectives laid out in our Agency Strategic Plan (ASP). We organized our Plan into the following major sections:

Our Mission and Challenges: This section gives an overview of our mission, and highlights the most significant challenges we face. We lay the framework for our Plan by describing how our changes in technology and service delivery have converged with massive increases in our workloads and limited resources.

Gathering Suggestions and Comments: The Gathering Suggestions and Comments section describes how we sought input for our Plan. We detail the questions we asked and the responses we received from our employees, the public, and Congress.

Initiatives: We identify 22 key *Initiatives* that illustrate how we plan to provide the American public with the highest quality of service over the next 10 years. Each is directly linked to one or more of our strategic goals. For ease of discussion, we divided the initiatives into three groups: Direct Public Service, Indirect Support to Public Service, and Serving the Public's Trust.

Our Mission and Challenges

Few government agencies touch as many people as we do. The programs we administer provide a financial safety net for millions of Americans, and many consider them the most successful large-scale Federal programs in our nation's history. The responsibilities entrusted to us are significant. In fiscal year 2012, we:

- Paid over \$800 billion to almost 65 million beneficiaries;
- Issued 16 million new and replacement Social Security cards;
- Posted 220 million earnings items to workers' records;
- Completed more than 56 million transactions on our National 800 Number;
- Registered 2.2 million users for *MySocialSecurity* our online Social Security Statement;
- Assisted 45 million visitors;
- Received nearly 5 million retirement, survivor, and Medicare applications;
- Received about 3.2 million initial disability claims;
- Conducted 672,352 hearings;
- Completed over 443,233 full medical continuing disability reviews; and
- Completed over 2.6 million Supplemental Security Income (SSI) non-disability redeterminations.

We accomplish these tasks, and numerous others, with a nationwide workforce of about 81,000 employees, including the State Disability Determination Service (DDS) employees who make our disability determinations.

Our Challenges

Our mission is to deliver Social Security services and do so in ways that meet the changing needs and demographics of the American public. Today, we face significant challenges in accomplishing this mission:

- Our workloads have skyrocketed over the past five years as members of the baby boomer generation entered their peak years of disability risk and have begun to retire. We also absorbed unexpectedly large increases in workloads due to the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. From FYs 2007 to 2012, we experienced a growth of nearly 30 percent in retirement claims, about 25 percent in initial disability claims, and nearly 50 percent in hearings. We expect that many of our workloads will remain high in the future, as baby boomers continue to apply for benefits.
- We also increasingly contribute in important ways to furthering other National priorities, including assisting the Department of Homeland Security with its E-Verify program; handling Medicare prescription drug subsidy applications and work associated with the Affordable Care Act; and helping States verify information under the Help America Vote Act.
- At the same time, the budget environment is austere. In FYs 2011 and 2012, the difference between the President's Budget and our appropriation was greater than in any

year in the previous two decades. We have reduced the hours we are open to the public to allow us to complete late day interviews without using overtime. Our field and hearing office employees stopped visiting remote service sites to reduce travel time and costs, and we began to consolidate offices where it made business sense.

The Reality

When we first established our national field office structure in 1936, there was no alternative to face-to-face service. The Internet and the National 800 Number Network did not exist. We processed claims on paper, without computers, and housed our growing files across the country, making it difficult, if not impossible, to share work with other offices.

Times have changed. The public has embraced online services. In addition to providing another service option to the public, our online services save our employees time, allowing them to handle other workloads. Our online claims applications have been critical in allowing us to keep up with the onslaught of retirement claims and to minimize growth in the disability claims backlog during the recent economic recession.

The broad success of our online services does not diminish our commitment to provide face-to-face service to certain members of the public we serve or in certain circumstances related to their individual case. We recognize that not everyone is comfortable or able to interact with us in an automated fashion, and we will continue to improve this channel of public service particularly for our most vulnerable citizens.

We must respond to the fiscal realities, which means that we cannot do business as we always have. Using advanced technology that is cost effective for the taxpayer and convenient for our customers, we plan to reduce our real estate footprint. Advancements in our use of electronic folders have made much of our work easily transferrable, allowing offices to work together to improve service to the public. Consolidation of facilities reduces rent and overhead costs. We have consolidated offices where it makes business sense, and plan to continue to do so. We also plan to collocate field offices that assist customers applying for benefits with offices that conduct disability hearings, allowing our offices to share a broad range of resources with the objective of reducing overall costs.

We are building on our success as an agency that adopts smarter, more cost-effective ways of doing business. Our productivity increases year after year and our extremely low administrative cost ratio, which is only about 1.5 percent of benefit payments are evidence of this success. With workloads at an all-time high and a constrained budget environment, we will capitalize on new technologies and business concepts to cut costs, operate more efficiently, and provide the service Americans deserve.

Gathering Suggestions and Comments

In developing our Plan, we invited comments from the people we serve, members of Congress, the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), the Social Security Advisory Board, and our employees and unions by:

- Issuing a Federal Register notice;
- Sending letters requesting input from members of Congress who serve on our committees of jurisdiction, key advocates, and members of interest groups; and
- Using our website to request input from our employees and unions.

In each of these outreach efforts, we sought suggestions for ways to continue providing core services, such as handling claims, as well as new responsibilities such as verifying benefit amounts and assisting people with claims for other Federal benefits. We also sought ideas about how we could enhance our electronic services. We requested suggestions on handling workloads and interacting with our customers.

We received over 1,300 comments, the majority of which came from our employees. Both employees and external commenters suggested that we continue to expand and improve electronic services, notably developing an online SSI application and a means for individuals receiving SSI benefits to report changes in their living arrangements. They suggested we improve our Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) online application and create a secure online mechanism for the public to request a Social Security card. Many encouraged us to assess our real estate needs, the ways we deliver our services, and whether we should impose fees for certain services.

The overwhelming majority of comments supported thinking differently about how we provide services, while being mindful of our mission when serving the public. Comments that capture these thoughts include:

“SSA has always been an agency that is service oriented. Even with dwindling staff, we should do our best to continue to serve as best we can.”

“We may no longer be able to provide customers with conducting business via any option they chose.”

“Create an on-line application for title XVI benefits for the use of professional representatives...[iSSI for professional representatives] would lay a foundation for possible future development of an online [SSI application] that could be completed by applicants and non-professional representatives.”

We observed similar themes during our conversations with congressional committees, GAO and the Social Security Advisory Board. With regard to electronic services, congressional representatives and others asked us to describe our plan for providing services across our many service channels. They asked us to describe how we plan to increase our video service delivery and to provide a clear outline of our plan to move from primarily face-to-face service delivery to online services. Another suggestion urged us to clarify where we continue to see value in face-

to-face service. Finally, congressional representatives asked us to analyze existing online usage patterns as that process continues to evolve.

While pressing for our plans on transitioning more of our work to electronic services, these groups also asked us to examine our physical structure and the effect online service delivery may have on our bricks-and-mortar field offices and processing centers. Additionally, congressional representatives asked us to define the factors we consider when consolidating our field offices, and to consider evaluating our staffing structures.

On a final note, Congress encouraged us to address any necessary core Information Technology (IT) updates. We do so separately from this Plan and refer readers to our [Information Resources Management Strategic Plan](#) for more information.

Service Delivery Initiatives

Our [Agency Strategic Plan](#) defines our goals for the next four years. We designed this Plan as a companion document, defining initiatives that are key to achieving our service delivery goals. The 22 initiatives outlined in this Plan are directly linked to one or more of our strategic goals. For ease of discussion, we divided the initiatives into three service delivery areas:

- **Direct Public Service:** initiatives readily seen and used by the public;
- **Indirect Support to Public Service:** projects and improvements that support our workforce and the systems we use to serve the public; and
- **Serving the Public's Trust:** initiatives that serve the American taxpayer by ensuring the accuracy of our payments and efficiency of our operations.

While the initiatives we highlight are important service delivery improvements, they are not an exhaustive list of our advances in service delivery. Other agency planning and reporting documents, provide details about the ways our agency is improving to meet the public's overall needs. Agency planning and reporting documents include:

- [Performance and Accountability Report](#),
- [Annual Performance Plan](#),
- [Information Resources Management Strategic Plan](#) (IRMS), and
- [Justification of Estimates for Appropriations Committees](#)

It is important to note that the initiatives in this Plan represent the administrative measures we will undertake to improve service. There are also ways to simplify our rules and procedures that would likewise improve service. Some changes require legislative action. We believe a legislative proposal in the President's FY 2013 Budget, the Work Incentives Simplification Pilot (WISP), could demonstrate more successful work outcomes for disability beneficiaries and reduce overpayments by simplifying the rules for returning to work. Another proposal in the President's Budget would modify the Internal Revenue Code to require more businesses to file tax returns electronically. This proposed change would provide more timely access to electronic forms, reduce improper payments, and eliminate labor-intensive, error-prone scanning and manual data entry of paper forms.

While these are just a couple examples of current legislative proposals that we believe will improve the way we do business, whether or not they are ultimately enacted does not fundamentally affect our commitment to improved service delivery. We have an ongoing process for developing legislative proposals, which will continue to strive for program simplifications and other legislative ways to improve public service.

Service Delivery Plan Initiatives Mapped to Agency Strategic Plan (ASP) Goals and Objectives

In the chart that follows, we group the 22 initiatives into one of the three aforementioned service delivery areas and identify the strategic goals and objectives each serves. The following sections discuss each initiative and identify significant milestones.

Goal 1: Deliver Quality Disability Decisions and Services

1. Reduce the Wait Time for Hearing Decisions and Eliminate the Hearings Backlog*
2. Improve Our Disability Policies, Procedures, and Tools
3. Expedite Cases for the Most Severely Disabled Individuals

Goal 3: Preserve the Public’s Trust in Our Programs

1. Increase Efforts to Accurately Pay Benefits*
2. Recover Improper Payments
3. Maintain Accurate Earnings Records
4. Make Our Administrative Operations Even More Efficient

Goal 2: Provide Quality Service to the Public

1. Increase the Use of Our Online Services*
2. Increase Public Satisfaction with Our Telephone Services
3. Expand Use of Video Services
4. Improve the Clarity of Our Notices

Goal 4: Strengthen Our Workforce and Infrastructure

1. Strengthen our Workforce – Recruit, Train, Develop, and Retain Superior Employees
 2. Maintain Secure and Reliable IT Services
 3. Increase Efficiency of Our Physical Infrastructure
- *2012-2013 Priority Goals

SDP Initiatives Mapped to Agency Strategic Goals/Objectives		<u>ASP Goal 1</u> Deliver Quality Disability Decisions & Services			<u>ASP Goal 2</u> Provide Quality Service to the Public				<u>ASP Goal 3</u> Preserve the Public’s Trust in our Programs				<u>ASP Goal 4</u> Strengthen our Workforce & Infrastructure		
		1	2	3	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3
Direct Public Service	MySocialSecurity				■			■			■				
	Internet Applications		■		■										
	SSI Mobile Wage Reporting								■		■				
	Virtual Services	■					■								
	Third-Party Requests and Payments				■							■			
	Notice Improvements							■							
	CARE 2020				■	■		■						■	
Indirect Support to Public Service	Occupational Information System		■												
	Disability Claims Processing		■	■											
	Regular Updates to Medical Listings		■	■											
	Visitor Intake Process											■		■	
	Electronic Hearings Process	■	■												
	New National Support Center													■	
	Disability Case Processing System		■											■	
	Quality Performance Improvements													■	
Assessment of our Workforce Structure													■		
Serving the Public’s Trust	Continuing Disability Reviews		■						■	■					
	Access to Financial Institutions								■	■					
	Real Estate Footprint Changes														■
	Self Service Options				■	■						■			
	Online Service Channeling				■							■			
	Fees for Services				■										

Initiatives Directly Serving the Public

Our vision is to provide the highest standard of considerate and thoughtful service for generations to come. The Plan's first group of initiatives addresses our work that is readily seen and used by the public. These initiatives address the changing needs and preferences of Americans, which have fundamentally transformed how we conduct business. Ten years ago, the public completed applications for retirement and disability almost exclusively on paper, and primarily interacted with us face-to-face in a field office. Today, however, many individuals conduct business with us over the phone, or via the Internet. In FY 2012, close to 45 percent of retirement applicants and over 33 percent of disability applicants filed their claims online. Also in FY 2012, we received over 79 million calls from individuals seeking to conduct business with us via our National 800 Number network.

Our Internet interactions with the American public are consistent with national trends. According to an [August 2012, Pew Internet Survey](#), adult Internet usage rose from 46 percent in 2000 to 85 percent in 2012. [Another Pew Survey from April 2010](#) showed that 82 percent of Internet users (representing 61 percent of all American adults) looked for information or completed a transaction on a Government website in the 12 months preceding the survey. We kept these trends in mind as we develop initiatives to best serve the needs of the American public.

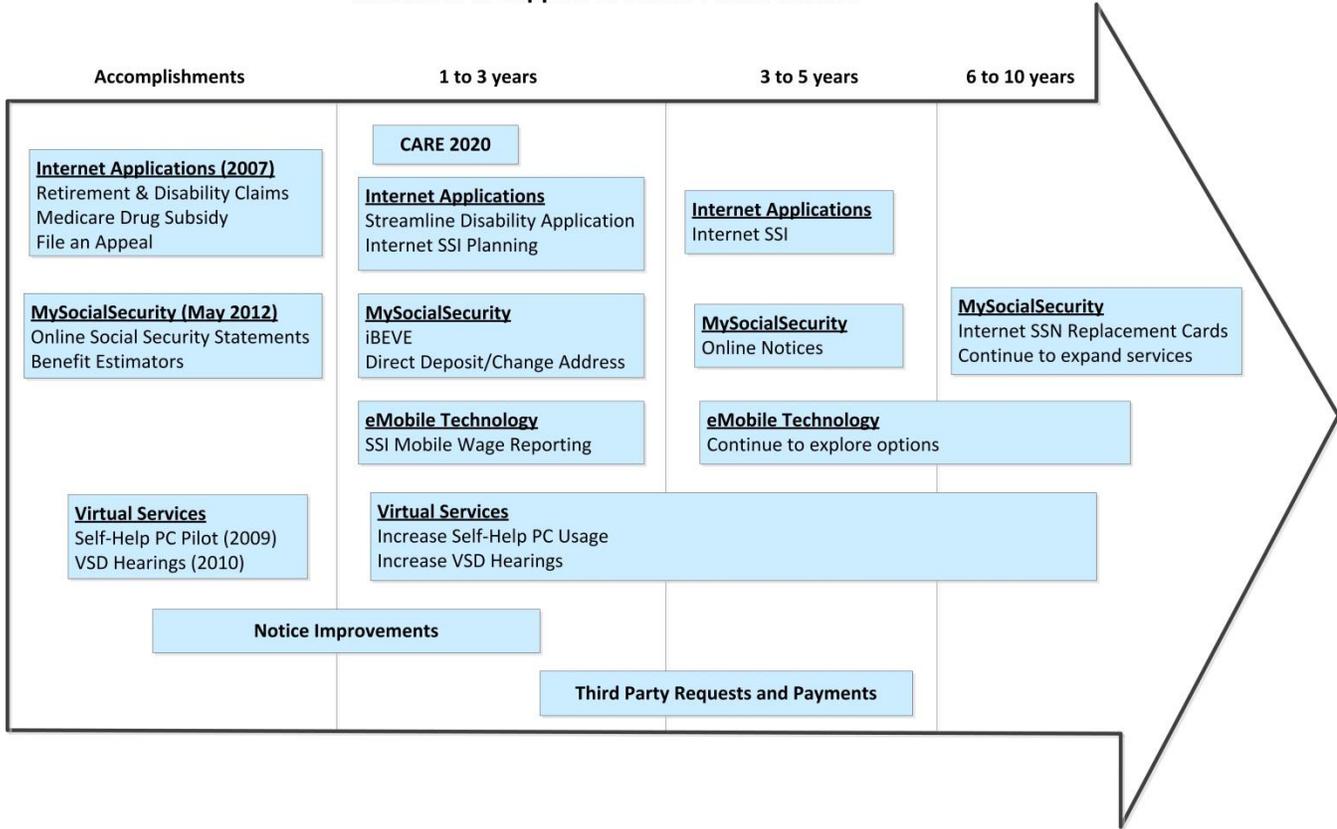
[SSA uses American Customer Satisfaction Index \(ACSI\) data](#) to measure customer satisfaction and to predict future behaviors of users of our online services. The data is collected, compiled, and reported to us by Foresee, a private sector company that administers ACSI surveys for businesses and government agencies across the country. We have received customer satisfaction scores for some of our online services [that rival or exceed highly rated private-sector consumer organizations](#) like Amazon.com.

While customer satisfaction is one of our goals, resource constraints also drive our focus on online services. Even with over 30 percent of all new claims now being filed online, the average number of daily visitors to our offices remains high. Coupled with staffing restrictions, we have experienced an increase in our field office wait times for those without appointments from 18.7 minutes in FY 2011 to 20.0 minutes in FY 2012. Additional staff losses may result in even longer wait times.

We are excited by the public response to our online services, but we know we can improve. In FY 2012, we upgraded our iAppeals application to make the application fully accessible to visually impaired users. We began Spanish iClaim last year and will expand it if warranted; currently use is slowly increasing to approximately 1,000 claims each month. Over the past 10 years, we have steadily and successfully reengineered many of our claims processes, and will continue to do so.

The following chart identifies initiatives that will allow us to continue to build on our successes, either by substantially improving existing processes or by creating new ones.

Initiatives in Support of Direct Public Service



1. MySocialSecurity

ASP Goal 2, Objective 1: Increase the Use of our Online Services

Many of our initiatives build upon the success of the recently released MySocialSecurity, which provides Internet users with a secure, single point of access to do business with us.

MySocialSecurity verifies a user's identity, similar to the way a large financial institution does. Once a user successfully enters MySocialSecurity, he or she can verify earnings history, and complete several routine actions.

MySocialSecurity offers personalized access to our online services, displaying data from our records that is specific to the user. With the initial release of MySocialSecurity on May 1, 2012, individuals can access their Online Social Security Statements containing annual earnings history and benefit estimates. Six months after implementation, successful registrants had accessed the Online Statement service over three million times. Initial feedback is very positive, and we monitor feedback to identify additional services to offer.

Based on comments from the public and our employees, as well as the growing trend towards a more "virtual" environment, we are developing the following initiatives to be offered through MySocialSecurity:

- Internet Benefit Verification, or iBEVE
- Direct Deposit and Change of Address
- Online Notices
- Online Requests for Replacement Social Security Cards

1.1 Internet Benefit Verification

Upon request, we provide benefit verifications, or "proof of income" letters, to individuals who need proof of the type and amount of income or services received from Social Security.

Individuals may provide the letter to a third party, for example, as proof of current Medicare coverage, proof of retirement status or disability, or proof of income when applying for a loan or mortgage.

Currently, an individual can receive a benefit verification at one of our field offices, or via mail by calling our National 800 Number Network. Although this service is not part of our core work to process and pay benefits, we have historically provided this type of benefit verification as a service to the public.

In FY 2007, our field offices responded to nearly 3.8 million requests for benefit verifications. By FY 2012, we had issued over 5.6 million benefit verifications in our field offices a 48 percent increase over five years. In response to increased demand, we developed a new way to provide this service to the public – the iBEVE, which we introduced in January 2013, and which will allow users to log into MySocialSecurity to view, print, and save their proof of income letter.

1.2 Direct Deposit and Change of Address Services

Although we offer both direct deposit and change of address services online through a PIN and password system, we are renovating our process to match the look and feel of our other online services and include it as part of the MySocialSecurity suite of services. This change will allow users to complete these services, and others we offer, during a single online session.

By including this new service online, we expect to reduce the need for individuals to travel to a field office or call the National 800 Number Network.

1.3 Online Notices

We send approximately 350 million notices each year. Prior to implementing MySocialSecurity and the Online Statement, we sent all notices exclusively through the United States Postal Service at a substantial cost exceeding \$200 million each year. We recognize the need to “go green” and save money while ensuring that our customers have timely access to notices, and our online notices initiative meets both needs. Once securely logged into MySocialSecurity, users will be able to view, print, and save available notices.

We began planning for online notices in FY 2013 and will begin the complex task of converting notices by FY 2014. We expect to offer Online Notices for public use in FY 2014.

1.4 Online Requests for Replacement SSN Cards

In FY 2011, we received over 11 million requests for replacement Social Security Number (SSN) cards - making this one of our highest volume workloads. Currently, we provide this service via face-to-face interaction in a field office or through standard mail. Because this is a high volume workload and we recognize that a replacement SSN card is often an immediate need, we plan to offer this service online via MySocialSecurity.

The Internet SSN Replacement Cards System will be an automated, highly secure system an individual can use to request a replacement SSN card by filing an online application.

We will begin planning in FY 2014 and anticipate implementation in six to ten years.

2. Internet Applications

ASP Goal 2, Objective 1: Increase the Use of Our Online Services

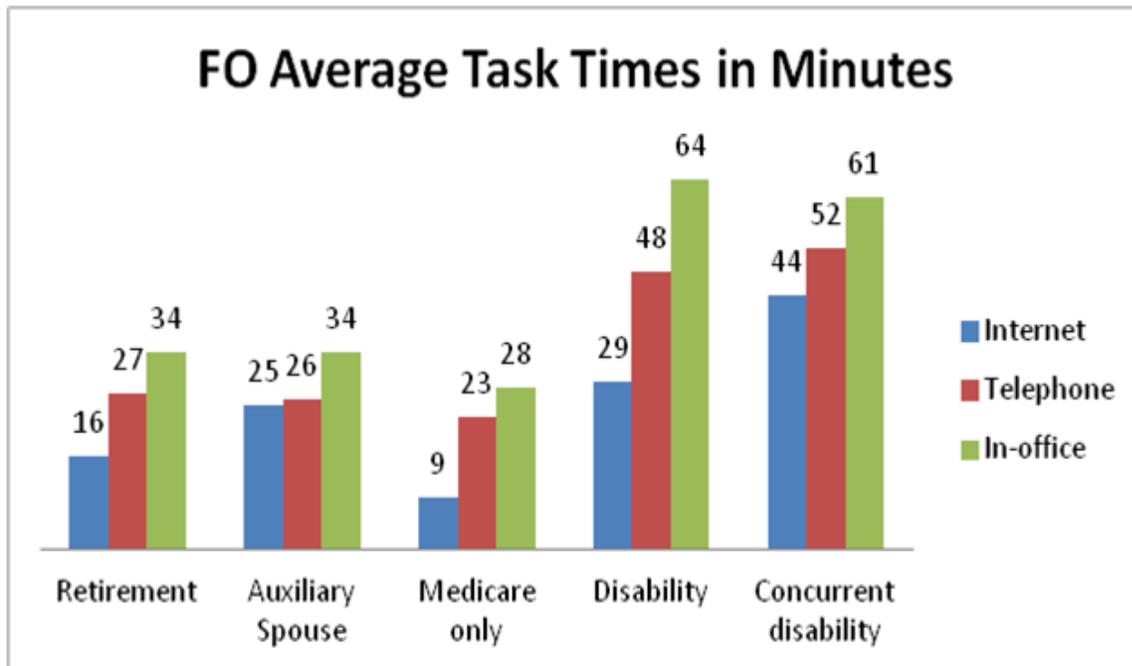
Many of our benefit applications are currently available on the Internet. We will continue to re-evaluate these applications to ensure that they serve the public’s needs. Often times, we make subtle changes designed to ensure that our applications look the same. Other times, like those described below, we make significant changes or create a completely new application.

2.1 Streamlining Our Disability Application

We are streamlining the online disability application process by providing users a cohesive online application that requests both medical and non-medical information. Some applicants have found the current two-part application confusing and cumbersome.

Additionally, our *Fiscal Year 2012 Title II Claims Study* by our Office of Quality Performance found that Internet claims, when compared to telephone and in-office claims, required more contacts for missing information. In spite of the higher contact rate, however, Internet claims had the lowest average field office (FO) staff completion times.

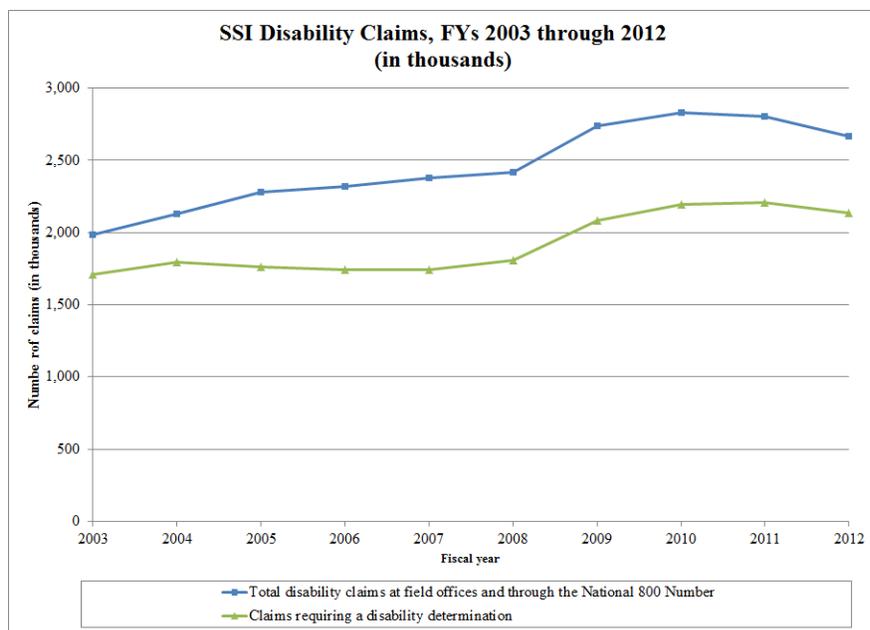
By updating and improving the application process, we expect to reduce the amount of time it takes to complete the online disability application and ensure applicants send us a complete application every time. We expect the updated online disability application will be ready for use in June 2013.



2.2 Internet SSI Application

Currently, the online disability application is limited to Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). We recognize that giving applicants the ability to file claims online enhances public service and workflow management, we plan to create an online application for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits.

Although the SSI and SSDI application processes are similar, the SSI program as a needs-based program tends to be more complicated to administer. There are many elements involved in verifying income and resources for each application.



Therefore, it will take a substantial effort to address the requirements of an online SSI application. We will begin planning for the internet SSI application in FY 2014 and anticipate implementation within the next three to five years.

3. SSI Mobile Wage Reporting

ASP Goal 3, Objective 1: Increase Efforts to Accurately Pay Benefits

ASP Goal 3, Objective 3: Maintain Accurate Earnings Records

According to the White House report, [Digital Government: Building a 21st Century Platform to Better Serve the American People](#), mobile broadband subscriptions are expected to grow from nearly one billion in 2011 to over five billion globally in 2016. By 2015, more Americans will access the Internet via mobile devices than desktop personal computers. As of March 2012, 46 percent of American adults are smartphone owners – up from 35 percent in May 2011. In fact, in 2011, global smartphone shipments exceeded personal computer shipments for the first time.

With this shift in mind, we are implementing smartphone applications to allow our customers to conduct business with us through this important service delivery channel. One example is our SSI Mobile Wage Reporting application. As a condition of receiving SSI payments, recipients or their representative payees must report any changes in the recipient's income. Traditionally, individuals do so by calling our automated telephone wage reporting system or by visiting a local field office. We then manually update our systems with the information.

The SSI Mobile Wage Reporting application allows recipients and representative payees to use their smartphones to report monthly wage information at their convenience, and allows our system to quickly update the information. This alternate method of wage reporting reduces delays between a recipient's reporting of an income change and the update to our systems. We expect this will decrease the likelihood that we issue an improper payment due to unreported wages. We will initially offer the mobile application to a small number of users and will gradually expand its usage.

We will evaluate the project's success by soliciting user feedback on the mobile application and the time taken to complete a mobile wage report. We will develop updates to improve usability.

4. Virtual Services

ASP Goal 1, Objective 1: Reduce the Wait Time for Hearing Decisions & Eliminate the Hearings Backlog

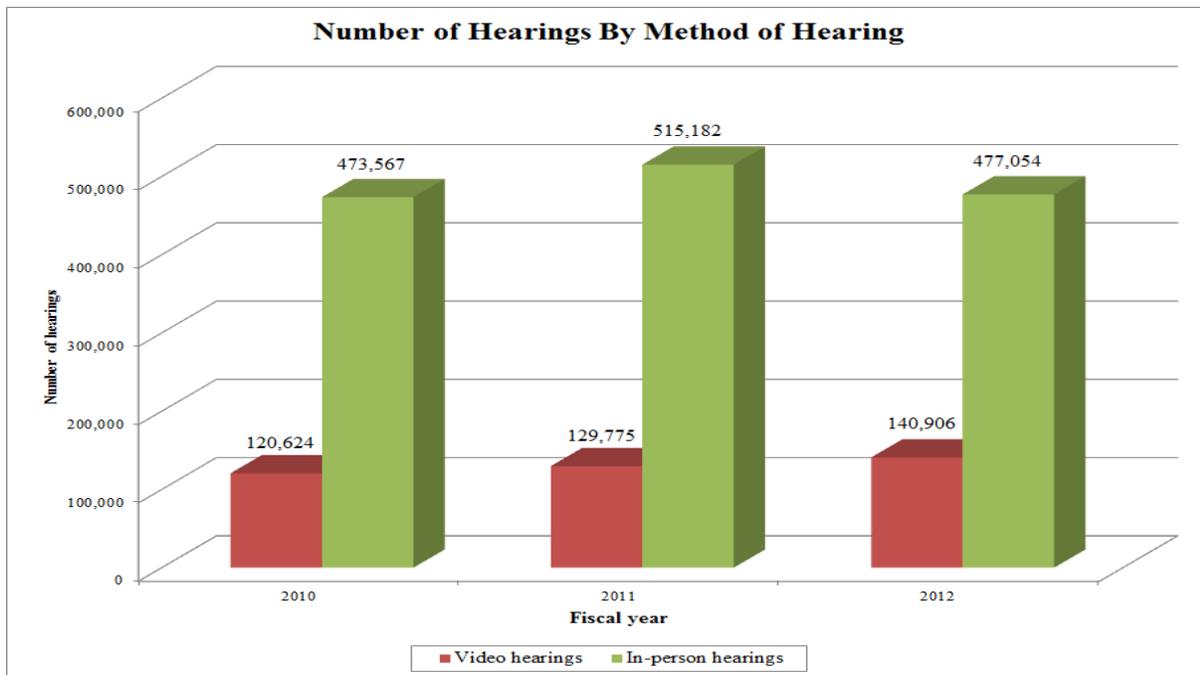
ASP Goal 2, Objective 3: Expand Use of Video Services

ASP Goal 3, Objective 4: Make Our Administrative Operations Even More Efficient

4.1 Video Service Delivery

Video Service Delivery (VSD) is an innovative, cost-effective method of providing service. Using video-conference equipment, we can serve members of the public in other SSA offices or non-SSA locations (video partner sites). We can better serve citizens who live long distances from an SSA field office, critical needs populations, such as American Indian Reservation residents, and those who are hospital-bound.

VSD allows us to shift workloads from an office with a high volume of walk-in traffic to an office with a lower volume, thus reducing wait times for visitors and workloads for employees at high-volume offices. We have 431 video devices installed in field offices across the country. From July 2011 through July 2012, we completed 73,704 video calls and 116,587 video interviews with field office customers.



Our video network extends beyond our field offices to our 162 hearing offices and 5 national hearing centers. Many hearing rooms are video equipped, allowing us to hold hearings with members of the public at remote field offices. Judges at our National Hearing Centers conduct all of their hearings by video, assisting hearing offices with the longest wait times. Holding hearings by video is more convenient to the public and saves taxpayer dollars by reducing travel time and costs.

In 2012, we held almost 25 percent of all of our hearings by video, compared to less than five percent in 2004. That means that more than 150,000 people were served faster than they would have without this innovation. We will continue to look for opportunities to expand the use of video service delivery in the future.

4.2 Self-Help Personal Computers

While we enhance the online services we offer, we recognize not all of our customers have access to, or the ability to use, personal computers (PC). Many applicants continue to apply for benefits in person at our field offices, either because they do not have a computer at home, or because they need assistance completing the online application. To better serve these customers, we installed Self-Help PCs in SSA field offices across the country. Self-Help PCs allow customers to apply for benefits or complete other transactions online while having an SSA employee available to answer questions and help navigate the online process. The Self-Help PC initiative also benefits our customers by enhancing our public service in reduced staffing situations, reducing field office wait times, and offering another service option for visitors.

We currently have 308 Self-Help PCs with steady, daily usage in 159 field office locations. We will expand Self-Help PCs into additional sites in the future as resources allow and may explore the possibility of also placing these units in other Federal and state partner agencies where it makes good business sense to do so.

5. Third-Party Requests and Payments

ASP Goal 2, Objective 1: Increase the Use of Our Online Services

ASP Goal 3, Objective 4: Make Our Administrative Operations More Efficient

Every year, we handle approximately two million requests for information from third parties who seek information on behalf of, and with the consent of, another individual. Over 70 percent of these requests are from representatives handling SSDI and SSI cases. Traditionally, these requests for everything from entitlement data to payment information are handled in our local field offices.

To improve this process and manage this growing workload, we are creating a centralized, fee-based, automated business process that will allow third parties to submit requests through a secure Internet site. By diverting all third-party requests from our field offices, we expect to reduce the traffic and wait times in field offices.

In the first quarter of FY 2013, we are piloting this initiative with a few of our high-volume third-party requesters. We will assess this pilot before implementing the program on a larger scale. Over the next three years we will continue to build the infrastructure, streamline our procedures, and standardize our fee processes.

6. Notice Improvements

ASP Goal 2, Objective 4: Improve the Clarity of Our Notices

Timely delivery of clear, understandable notices is an important part of our commitment to delivering excellent service to the public. Our notices communicate disability and other entitlement decisions, inform individuals of their rights and responsibilities, and inform

individuals about the services they receive. Our goal is to produce clearly written notices that help the public better understand our programs, services, and decisions. Unfortunately, due to the inherent complexity of the issues and policies communicated in notices, our communications are not always the most effective.

With the notice improvement initiative, we will strengthen and improve the overall clarity, tone, readability, and structure of notices to ensure notices are clear, complete, concise, consistent, and written in plain language. We are standardizing notice language across our different programs. We will reduce the time it takes to implement new or revised notice language and improve our ability to generate notices in any format, including online notices, special notices for the blind or visually impaired, and large print notices.

While we regularly update our notices to reflect policy changes, in FY 2013, we will also revise our standard language in notices related to Retirement, Survivors, and Disability Insurance to ensure it is easy to understand.

7. CARE 2020

ASP Goal 2, Objective 1: Increase the Use of Our Online Services

ASP Goal 2, Objective 2: Increase Public Satisfaction with Our Telephone Services

ASP Goal 2, Objective 4: Improve the Clarity of Our Notices

In FY 2012, over 79 million people called our National 800 Number Network, either to speak with a representative or to perform a variety of self-service functions such as changing their address. We expect the number of calls to increase as members of the baby boomer generation continue aging and enter their retirement and disability-prone years.

To ensure reliable telephone services, we are replacing our telephone infrastructure with a new system, Citizen Access Routing Enterprise through 2020 (CARE 2020). CARE 2020 will provide the same services but replace our current infrastructure of private phone lines with newer technology. This newer technology via Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) will provide enough additional telephone lines to accommodate the volume of calls we receive and nearly eliminate the chance that a caller will receive a “busy” signal, which in FY 2012 happened to 4.6 percent of callers.

Migration to CARE 2020 starts in FY 2013 when we begin to modify our main caller menu and automated services. With the newer technology, we also plan to develop and implement additional features during FYs 2013 - 2015.

- Callers will be able to provide us immediate feedback about the service they received via post call customer feedback surveys.
- The public will be able to request a callback at a scheduled time from National 800 Number agents through the SSA.gov website.
- The public will be able to interact with National 800 Number agents while doing their business online with Web Chat, or other features similar to instant messaging.

Initiatives Providing Indirect Support to Public Service

The American people have come to expect certain things from our agency. They expect our policies to adapt to technology. They expect our computer systems to move quickly and without interruption, so they may interact with us online and help move their application along. They expect our field offices to be amply staffed at all times. We expect to provide the excellent service they deserve.

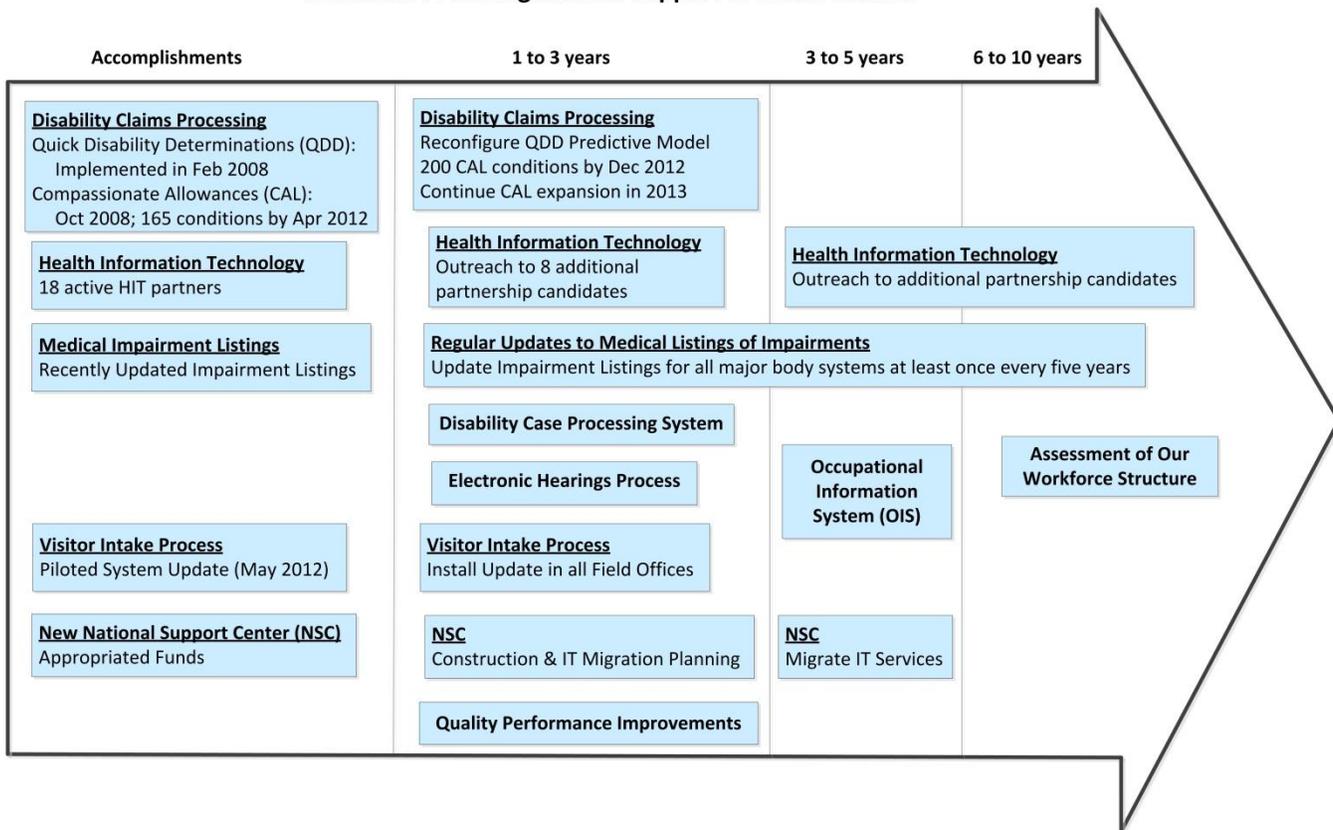
We have come a long way in updating our infrastructure, as evidenced in our electronic disability process. Ten years ago, we had so many paper folders we struggled to find places to store them. Retrieving the paper information was so difficult that, when a claimant moved, it could take over a week to get the appropriate paper folder to his new servicing office. If an office was overwhelmed with work, it was nearly impossible to have another office assist.

Then we implemented our electronic disability folder. The change, just like any major adjustment to infrastructure, did not happen overnight. We set goals for taking more applications via our electronic disability folder, and we met every one of them. Eventually, we reached our goal of having almost every application housed in an electronic format. We kept improving and kept updating our systems to provide better, more accurate, and quicker service to the public. Now, we process nearly every application electronically, from the initial stage through the hearings and appeals process.

While the electronic disability folder is just one example of how we have improved our behind-the-scenes systems to serve the public service, we have additional goals tied to our strategic plan, which will improve our service delivery.

The chart on the following page identifies the timelines for the initiatives providing indirect support to public service.

Initiatives Providing Indirect Support to Public Service



8. Occupational Information System

ASP Goal 1, Objective 2: Improve Our Disability Policies, Procedures, and Tools

One of our missions is to promote responsive Social Security programs by conducting effective policy development, research, and program evaluation. When looking for ways to improve accuracy on our disability determinations, we evaluated our use of the Department of Labor's Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT), which we rely on to help determine the vocational ability of individuals applying for disability benefits.

When making a disability determination under our rules, we follow a five-step sequential evaluation process. The first step reviews our primary rule to see if the claimant is performing substantial gainful activity. The second and third steps look at the medical aspects of the case. For the last two steps, we look at the claimant's physical and mental ability to perform work related tasks. At these steps, we determine whether the claimant can perform his or her past job, or if he or she can do other work that exists in significant numbers in the national economy. At these later steps in our disability evaluation, we need occupational information to help us determine what type of work the claimant may be able to do and for that, we use the DOT.

To make better informed decisions on whether disability claimants meet our disability criteria, we are developing a new Occupational Information System to replace the DOT. We convened a panel of experts to guide us in the development of new occupational information. The panel's

work and research by agency staff have laid the groundwork for moving the project to the second phase, which involves collecting data on the relevant requirements of jobs in the national economy. We are working with the Bureau of Labor Statistics at the Department of Labor to determine the best ways to collect the data. After we complete our analysis, we will produce an updated modern occupational product that will assist our adjudicators in making disability determinations and decisions.

We plan ongoing data collection testing and analysis in FYs 2013 and 2014. We expect to begin developing our Occupational Information System in FY 2015 and implement it by FY 2016. This new reference source will be more efficient for our disability adjudicators and ensure that we are making the best possible decision on each case.

9. Disability Claims Processing

ASP Goal 1, Objective 2: Improve our Disability Policies, Procedures, and Tools

ASP Goal 1, Objective 3: Expedite Cases for the Most Severely Disabled Individuals

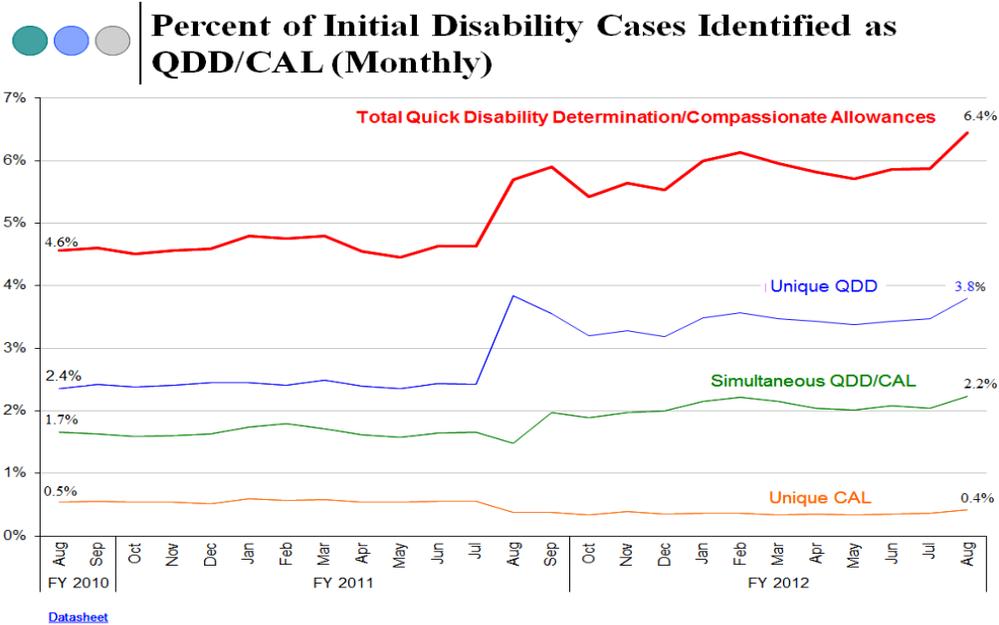
We have made significant progress in our efforts to decrease the backlogs in our disability hearings cases. We have also worked from the opposite end of the spectrum to create new processes that help expedite decisions on our most critical claims.

9.1 Quick Disability Determinations and Compassionate Allowances

We are always striving to serve the public better, faster, and more accurately. The Quick Disability Determination (QDD) and Compassionate Allowances (CAL) initiatives are two examples of how improved policy paired with better technology can serve customers whose disability claims have certain characteristics.

The QDD process uses predictive modeling and computer-based screening tools to identify cases where medical evidence is readily available and a favorable disability determination is highly likely. By identifying these cases early in the process, we can expedite processing and approve some cases in days rather than months. We are always working to ensure our model continues to select only cases with high potential for fully favorable decisions. In FY 2013, we are again adjusting the model. If the updated model meets expectations we will implement the reconfigured QDD process in the summer of 2013.

The CAL initiative, implemented in October 2008, expedites the processing of disability claims for applicants whose medical conditions are so severe that their conditions qualify under the Listing of Impairments based on minimal objective medical information. These conditions include cancers, neurological conditions, and immune system disorders affecting adults and children.



In December 2012, we added 35 conditions to the CAL list, bringing the total to 200. The complete list is available on our [website](#). By the summer of 2013, we plan to expand the list of conditions based upon recommendations we receive from consultations with the medical, research, and advocacy communities.

9.2 Helping Wounded Warriors

We rely on our military service members to protect our freedoms in the United States and overseas, and we strive to support them when they need our help. Since 2005, service members disabled while on active duty on or after October 1, 2001, receive expedited processing of their disability claims through our Wounded Warriors program.

Over the years, we have sought to ensure that we fast-track disability claims from these Wounded Warriors, and have asked our fellow Federal entities to join in our efforts. To facilitate payment of benefits to service members, we are working with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Defense (DoD) to streamline the disability process. We have a memorandum of understanding with DoD that allows them to share information on Wounded Warriors, so we may identify these service members for expedited processing when they apply for benefits. We also began an initiative with VA and DoD to share medical information, so we can obtain a wounded service member's medical records within a matter of days. In addition, we have created a [Wounded Warrior website](#), as well as a webinar that contains helpful information about our benefits and programs for service members. We will work with our stakeholders to improve service to Wounded Warriors.

9.3 Health Information Technology

Each year, we issue over 15 million requests for applicant medical records to medical centers, health care organizations, and health insurance companies. We generally wait anywhere from 10 to 35 days to obtain these records in the mail or by fax. With our new Medical Evidence Gathering and Analysis through Health Information Technology process - more commonly known as MEGAHIT - we can now obtain records in a matter of minutes. We use the eHealth Exchange (formerly known as the Nationwide Health Information Network) to electronically request and receive medical information quickly and accurately, improving the speed and quality of our disability process and helping reduce our backlog in processing disability applications. We have 18 active health IT partners, and our outreach team is actively engaged with 8 additional partnership candidates. In FY 2012, we received over 22,000 medical documents from our health IT partners. To expedite claims processing for the public we serve, we will evaluate the accuracy of health IT evidence and also invest in new partnerships.

10. Regular Updates to Medical Listings

ASP Goal 1, Objective 2: Improve Our Disability Policies, Procedures, and Tools

Our adjudicators rely on information in the medical Listing of Impairments (Listings) to make a disability determination. The Listings describe impairments severe enough to prevent an individual from performing any gainful activity. The Listings are organized by major body systems - 14 for adults and 15 for children. Altogether, the Listings provide information on over 100 impairments.

The Listings are a critical factor in our disability determination process. To ensure we provide our applicants with accurate disability determinations, we will update the Listings regularly. Specifically, we will update all major body systems at least once every five years. We owe it to the public to maintain the consistency and accuracy of our decisions at all levels of the disability process. By frequently updating the Listings, we aim to keep up with the ever-changing world of medicine.

11. Visitor Intake Process

ASP Goal 3, Objective 4: Make Our Administrative Operations Even More Efficient

Customers formerly came in to a field office and “took a number,” as they might do at a grocery store deli counter. Customers would wait until their number was called and a receptionist would ask what they needed. The customer would then be asked to wait, again, for one of our technicians to call them. To reduce wait time, we installed Visitor Intake Process (VIP) kiosks in each office. Visitors check in upon arrival, indicating whether they have an appointment or selecting the reason for their visit from several standard service options. Once they check in, we can quickly route the visitor to the appropriate technician. Additionally, employees are able to retrieve relevant information about the visitor from our systems, resulting in a more productive interview.

Kiosks present options in English and Spanish, and each office may choose up to three additional languages based on the demographics of their particular service area. VIP supports 11 different languages and we plan to support additional languages in the near future. For visitors with visual

impairments, the kiosk also provides audio in all supported languages, plus a keypad option instead of the kiosk touch screen.

While VIP is an excellent tool to serve the public more efficiently, we recognize the need to improve. We are developing a system update, which will include enhanced visitor identification features for our visitors who are visually or hearing impaired, and will enable employees to more easily recognize and provide alternative interview services to these visitors. We will also be able to identify high security risk visitors more quickly, improving both employee and public security. We expect the updated system to be available in every field office in FY 2013.

12. Electronic Hearings Process

ASP Goal 1, Obj. 1: Reduce Wait Time for Hearing Decisions/Eliminate Backlog

ASP Goal 1, Obj. 2: Improve Our Disability Policies, Processes, and Tools

Reducing the backlog of applications awaiting a hearing decision has been, and continues to be, our priority. We hired more ALJs and other staff to handle this critical work. Our primary focus for enduring long-term change, however, is creating fully electronic hearings process. The electronic disability folder initiative noted earlier in this Plan, laid the foundation for our many technological advancements in this area. At the hearings level, as with other levels of the disability application process, we no longer rely on paper. Where we once photocopied paper folders or created CD-ROMs for representatives, we now allow representatives to view the electronic folder, as well as check the status of a claim online.

These changes have significantly decreased the staff resources required to perform this work. As such, staff is now able to spend more time preparing cases for a hearing. Currently, we are readying a new electronic application – the Availability and Scheduling Application (ASA), which will simplify hearings scheduling by coordinating representative and ALJ schedules, eventually incorporating expert witnesses. Successful implementation of ASA will streamline the tedious and time-consuming tasks and give hearing participants greater control over scheduling.

The project that we expect will most significantly enhance our move to a fully electronic hearings process is our Electronic Bench Book (eBB). Currently, an ALJ moves between several automated systems to review claims and document decisions, and decision writers use yet another system to write decisions. During a hearing, the ALJ often takes notes by hand or in Microsoft Word, and later gives instructions to assist in writing the decision. Cases often go back and forth between the ALJ and the decision writer for clarifications.

We designed the eBB to promote consistency in hearings decisions and assist ALJs in documenting, analyzing, and adjudicating disability claims. The eBB centralizes tasks ALJs and others use, thus eliminating the need to move between systems. The eBB will be used for pre-hearing analysis and to articulate the rationale for the judge's decision. The eBB will also allow ALJs to provide instructions for decision writers in a fully electronic environment. We expect this will make the decision writing process more efficient by eliminating the need for decision writers to decipher handwritten notes that the ALJs make during a hearing or meet with ALJs to clarify instructions. The eBB will make the review of the electronic file more complete and efficient, and we expect it will ultimately reduce the number of cases remanded for incomplete documentation.

We introduced a limited version of the eBB in three pilot sites in August 2012. An updated version will be available to all ALJs on a voluntary basis in March 2013. We will train all newly appointed ALJs to use the eBB. We expect that as many as 25 percent of ALJs will be using the eBB by the end of FY 2013, and 50 percent by the end of FY 2014.

13. New National Support Center

ASP Goal 4, Objective 2: Maintain Secure and Reliable IT Services

ASP Goal 4, Objective 3: Increase Efficiency of Our Physical Infrastructure

The security and reliability of our computer systems and data infrastructure drives our ability to serve the public. Our original data center, the National Computer Center (NCC), opened in 1980, and, at the time, was considered state-of-the-art. To give some perspective, the personal computer had yet to be released and mobile phones were outrageously expensive.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) provided \$500 million to construct a modern data center, the National Support Center (NSC). This investment also covers some of the costs necessary to transfer our information technology (IT) infrastructure from the NCC to the NSC, and some of the costs to equip a new data center. Although the ARRA provides funding for the construction of the NSC and for some of the costs of transition, successful migration to the NSC is not fully funded and will require additional resources in FYs 2015 and 2016.

With the NSC, our major focus is modernizing and improving our computing environment, while maintaining the highest level of systems availability, stability, and security. The NSC will use environmentally friendly solutions in daily operations, by using new IT infrastructure and hardware that are more energy efficient than those in current use.

We plan to move IT services from the NCC to the NSC over an 18-month period, from January 2015 to August 2016. As we prepare for the move to the NSC, we will implement several infrastructure enhancements to ensure there will be no disruption in systems service during this transition.

Once complete, the NSC will meet our anticipated IT workloads for at least the next 20 years. The completed NSC will enable us to move all IT activities out of the existing NCC and will add significant stability to our IT enterprise as a modern, efficient, and well-designed facility. The new support center will allow us to provide the data our field offices need to operate smoothly, and continue to provide the highest quality service to the American public.

14. Disability Case Processing System

ASP Goal 1, Objective 2: Improve Our Disability Policies, Procedures, and Tools

ASP Goal 4, Objective 2: Maintain Secure and Reliable IT Services

We rely on our partners in State disability agencies, along with our own Federal disability examiners, to review medical evidence and make timely and accurate disability determinations. Our partners across the country use different computer systems to adjudicate claims. We recognize updating the many different systems is inefficient and labor-intensive.

Our Disability Case Processing System (DCPS) initiative replaces the many different systems with one modern, unified system. Providing disability examiners with one consistent, streamlined processing system will allow us to improve our quality and accuracy for our disability applicants.

We worked with our State and Federal adjudicators to create a plan for implementing the system. In September 2012, we began limited use of DCPS in one of our five test states. Over the next year, we will improve and refine DCPS and begin implementation in all states in FY 2014. We expect all State and Federal disability adjudicators to use DCPS by the end of FY 2016.

15. Quality Performance Improvements

ASP Goal 4, Objective 1: Strengthen Our Workforce

Though we have automated many of our processes and procedures, the cornerstone of our public service is the commitment and personal excellence of our workforce. We depend on our employees to make tough decisions on benefit entitlement and, once entitled, we entrust our employees to ensure prompt and accurate benefit payments. To continue to strengthen and support our workforce, we must find new and innovative methods to pass on institutional knowledge and reinforce best practices.

We developed national programs to accomplish this goal. In our field offices, we aim to strengthen our employees' technical proficiency by measuring it against a consistent standard. In our hearing offices, we aim to improve our ability to make the right decision as early as possible with innovative technology, training, and feedback to adjudicators.

In our field offices, this initiative implements a uniform process to collect data and identify trends and training needs. Based on recommendations from our Office of Quality Performance, we identified 21 areas for improvement. We will begin with a pilot program at 10 field offices in the first quarter of FY 2013 and anticipate a national rollout by the end of FY 2013. Examples of workloads we will review include Continuing Disability Reviews that involve work activity, disability onset date, and overpayment waivers for payments made under both SSDI and SSI. We are developing training and user guides for our managers and reviewers.

Similarly, our Office of Appellate Operations (OAO) is producing quality data on hearing office decisions. OAO identifies recurrent issues in decision-making and recommends improvements in training and policies, as well as procedures for correction. We plan to broaden reviews of hearing decisions before they are effectuated, review remanded cases from the Appeals Council and Federal courts, refine the training, direct feedback, and personalize management information that we provide to adjudicators about quality issues in their work. By 2014, we plan to conduct 10,500 pre-effectuation reviews which would include 7,000 fully favorable and 3,500 dismissals. This initiative will provide us with the tools needed to continue delivering the highest quality service to the American public.

16. Assessment of Our Workforce Structure

ASP Goal 4, Objective 1: Strengthen Our Workforce

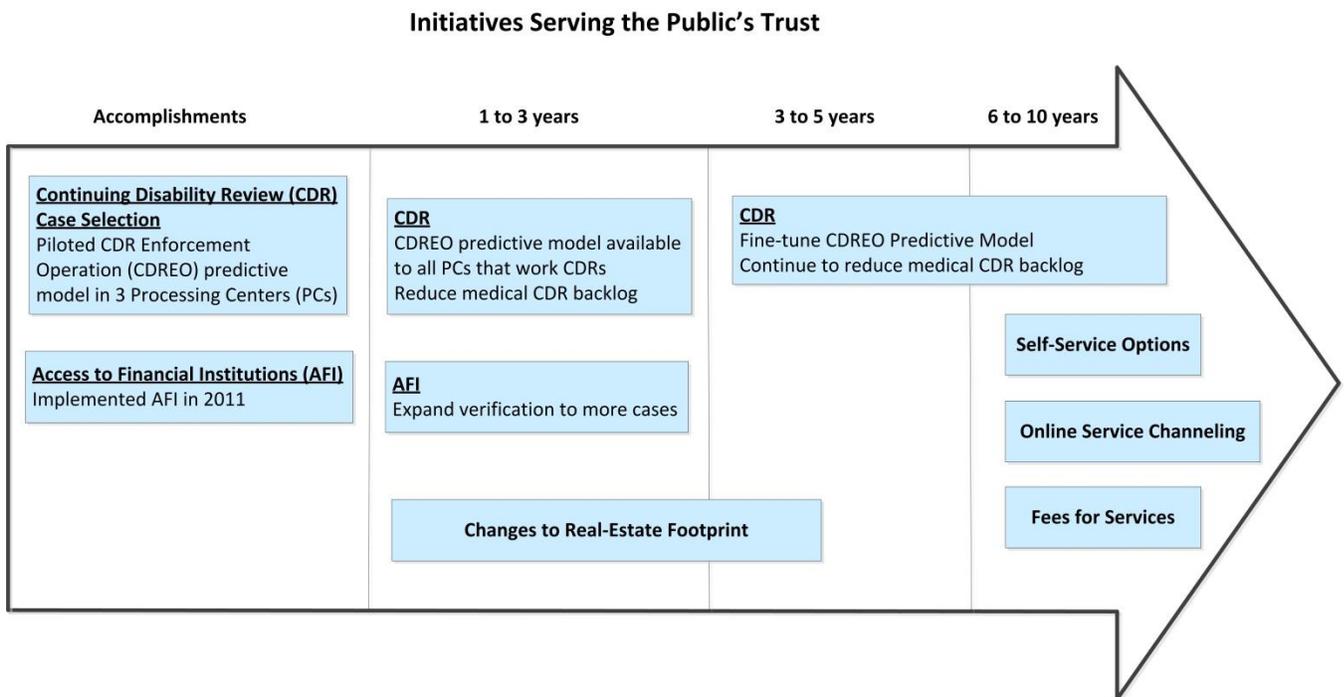
As we expand our use of virtual and automated service delivery channels, we must assess how best to structure our workforce to provide the most efficient, balanced, and high-quality service to the American public.

Building on the innovations of the past five years, we have created a flexible and virtual workplace that maximizes the skills and talents of our workforce. We can now consider shifting resources and work across the nation to better accommodate workload imbalances and disproportionate employee attrition. We will be able to train our employees in our eight processing centers to handle a more flexible range of work, such as broader program integrity workloads, SSDI and SSI work, and online workloads. Moving to a virtual model for taking claims will provide room for growth among our employees and create new opportunities in the future.

In the next 10 years, we will consider other options for providing the most effective service. One option is to develop a more generalized workforce by training employees to handle a variety of different workloads. This will minimize the need for an employee with one area of expertise to “hand off” a case to an employee in a different area, increasing our efficiency and improving the quality of our service. We may also consider centralizing our most complex workloads by assigning them to technical staff specially trained to handle them. By doing so, we will create a staff with the experience and subject matter expertise to process these complex workloads more efficiently and with fewer errors.

Initiatives Serving the Public's Trust

The American people expect us to conduct our programs in a secure and efficient manner. We administer over \$800 billion in benefits annually, and are responsible for approximately \$12 billion in operating costs each year. Throughout this document, we outline how we serve the public both directly and indirectly. However, we also need to assure we are paying the right benefit amount, to the right person, at the right time. Virtually all Americans can expect to become a customer of Social Security at some point in their lives. By managing the public investment wisely, we can be confident our programs will carry on for generations to come. The following initiatives outline how we will serve American taxpayers by keeping their investment safe.



17. Continuing Disability Review

ASP Goal 3, Obj. 1: Increase Efforts to Accurately Pay Benefits

ASP Goal 3, Obj. 1: Recover Improper Payments

We conduct two types of Continuing Disability Reviews (CDR) – work CDRs and medical CDRs.

17.1 Medical Continuing Disability Review

To ensure we pay disability benefits only to those who continue to meet our medical requirements, we conduct CDRs periodically for both SSDI and SSI beneficiaries to determine if their disabling condition has improved and if they are still eligible for benefits. We use statistical profiling to identify beneficiaries' probability of medical improvement. Each year we evaluate and update our statistical profiling model.

We conduct two types of CDRs: questionnaires (mailers) and full medical reviews. Generally, we send mailers to beneficiaries who have a low probability of demonstrating medical improvement. We schedule a full medical CDR for those beneficiaries with a higher probability of medical improvement. Full medical CDRs require a new medical evaluation and disability determination by our DDS examiners.

Our investment in statistical profiling has proved to be of significant value and ensures our medical CDR process is cost effective. We estimate that every dollar spent on CDRs will yield about \$9 in program savings over 10 years, including Medicare and Medicaid program effects.

The Budget Control Act of 2011 allows increases to the Government's annual spending caps through FY 2021 for program integrity spending. Our goal is to increase the number of CDRs to be consistent with the volumes the Budget Control Act would allow us to achieve. At these levels, we ultimately would be able to eliminate our backlog of CDRs. CDRs save taxpayers billions of dollars, but, without adequate funding, these savings will not be realized.

17.2 Work Continuing Disability Review

A work CDR is an evaluation of a beneficiary's work activity to determine if the work shows an individual can do substantial, gainful activity and if eligibility for disability benefits should continue. As a result of constrained staff resources and increasing numbers of new disability applications, we often find it difficult to meet our goals for conducting work CDRs.

Beneficiaries returning to work rely on us to communicate how their benefits will change when they return to work. Not processing work CDRs in a timely manner can lead to enormous overpayments and vast miscommunication to our customers. To help us prioritize our work CDRs, we are piloting the Continuing Disability Review Enforcement Operation (CDREO) predictive computer model that calculates the likelihood that disabled beneficiaries will receive a large overpayment as a result of returning to work. Examples of categories we use to identify the most likely candidates for work CDRs are:

- Health status, such as the primary disabling medical impairment;
- Economic variables, such as earnings and the family maximum benefit amount; and

- Program variables, such as the length of time a beneficiary has received benefits and the number of previous denials for eligibility.

We are piloting the CDREO predictive model and plan on having the model fully available by the end of FY 2013.

18. Access to Financial Institutions

ASP Goal 3, Obj. 1: Increase Efforts to Accurately Pay Benefits

ASP Goal 3, Obj. 1: Recover Improper Payments

Overpayments in the SSI program may occur when a recipient has financial accounts that exceed the allowable resource limits (currently \$2,000 for individuals and \$3,000 for couples). Under the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, SSI applicants, recipients, and deems must provide permission to contact financial institutions to verify any possible financial accounts to be found eligible for SSI benefits. We verify resources during the initial benefit application and at subsequent non-disability redeterminations in cases where individuals allege liquid resources, or resources that may be readily converted into cash.

Traditionally, we verified income and resources manually, and claims representatives were only able to look at accounts at financial institutions that the applicant disclosed. We recently implemented the Access to Financial Institutions (AFI) program, which allows our technicians to request and receive financial account information electronically; it automatically checks all known bank accounts. The AFI program also checks for any unknown accounts, to help identify whether an SSI applicant or recipient has countable resources in excess of the resource limit.

The AFI program helps us avoid many payment errors common in the past, and allows us to identify and subsequently eliminate improper payments, fraud, and abuse. AFI is a critical tool to help us improve program integrity and ensure the accuracy of SSI payments. We are assessing the feasibility of expanding AFI verifications to check more institutions for unknown accounts and increase the number of cases we verify through the AFI program.

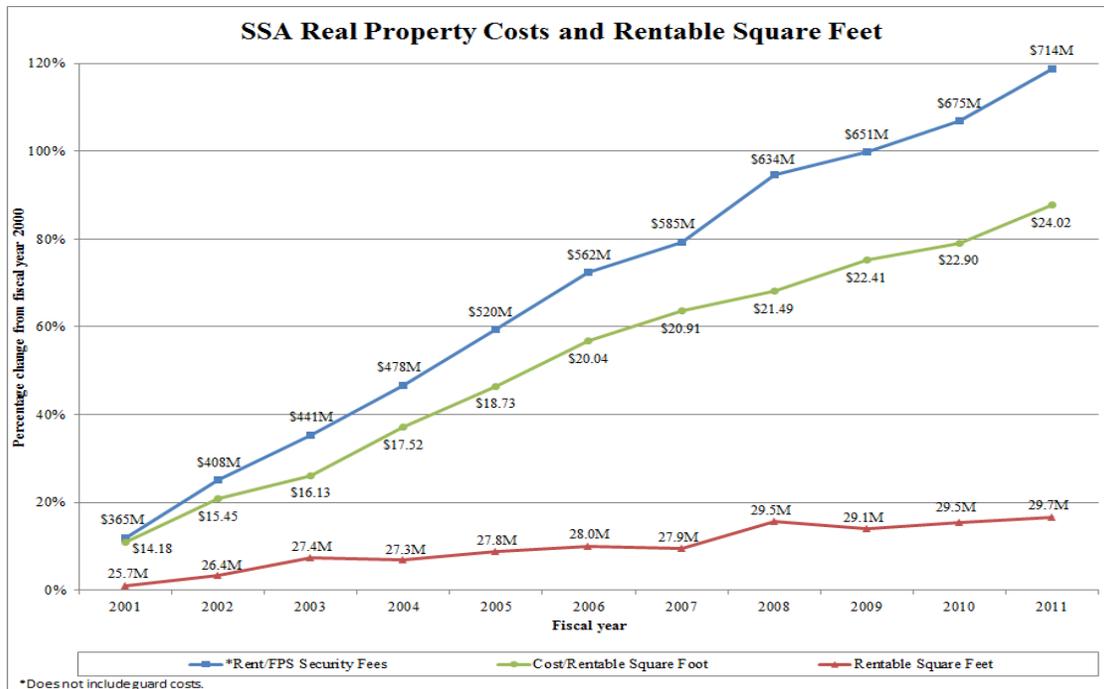
19. Changes to Real Estate Footprint

ASP Goal 3, Obj. 4: Make Our Administrative Operations More Efficient

In 1936, when we opened our first field office in Austin, Texas, every transaction we completed was on paper and required a signature. Having a physical presence in a variety of locations was essential to delivering quality service. Over the past 75 years, we have expanded from that single field office, to a field structure of approximately 1,250 offices. Offices vary in size, and each requires a staff from five to 75 employees.

Today, delivering our services no longer hinges on in-person contact. Our telephone, online, and video services provide the public with on-demand access to our programs at their convenience. In light of these changes, along with the growing desire for a virtual experience by our customers, we must examine our current field office structure. In addition, fiscal realities necessitate we determine efficient and cost-effective service delivery approaches.

The cost for real estate in general has risen drastically. As illustrated in the graph below, the average cost for our real estate has risen from \$14.18 per square foot to \$24.02 per square foot over the last 10 years.



Balancing these rising costs with delivering public service is no easy feat. The following initiatives aim to assist us in making the right decisions for the American people when it comes to our real estate infrastructure.

19.1 Collocation and Consolidation of Our Community-based Service Sites

We are developing a business plan for collocating our field offices with our hearing offices, as well as other permanent remote sites we use to conduct disability hearings. The collocation of hearing offices with local field offices allows a single office to serve the public's needs. As of July 2012, we have three collocated sites. We have more sites scheduled to be collocated in the near future.

In addition to collocating field offices and hearing offices, we are evaluating the feasibility of consolidating field offices in close proximity to one another. We regularly review our service sites to determine whether their operation remains cost-effective. We evaluate whether to consolidate an office with another office based on the:

- characteristics of the service area,
- proximity of nearby offices,
- options for service delivery,
- projected cost savings,
- employee attrition,
- adequacy of both offices' safety and security infrastructures, and,

- upcoming lease expirations.

Since we began tracking our consolidations in FY 2009, we have reduced our overall real estate footprint by 36 offices, saving \$119 million in rent and guard support over a 10-year period.

We explore the feasibility of non-conventional approaches to collocation, such as collocation with other Federal, State, and local government facilities.

19.2 Standardized Facilities and Security Initiatives

We believe that, just like our online services, our field offices should have the same look and feel. By introducing a standard, national physical security system, we will facilitate consistency of procedures and increase the safety of both the public and our employees.

We are adding a number of security enhancements in our field offices to provide the public and our staff a more secure environment in which to conduct business. Enhancements include introducing metal detectors in some offices, closed-circuit televisions, and additional security guards in those offices, where necessary.

20. Self Service Options

ASP Goal 2, Obj. 1: Increase the Use of Our Online Services

The public's expectations regarding service delivery are changing. We have found that, given the choice, a growing number of people prefer to interact with us at their convenience, primarily by using online or mobile services, rather than by interacting with us in-person or over the telephone. Our goal is to provide the highest quality service to the American public, and make the best use of our resources, therefore, we must adapt to both accommodate the public's preferences and provide services more efficiently.

We already created many opportunities for electronic interaction. In the disability hearings process, many claimant representatives check the status of claims online, rather than calling our offices. Medical providers submit their records via our Electronic Records Express website rather than in hard copy through the mail. Expanding electronic self-help options will encourage individuals to perform less complex tasks on their own and will reduce the amount of time our staff spends on completing such tasks. If the public can use the Internet, a smartphone, or an electronic kiosk to satisfy basic service needs, our employees will have more time to devote to tasks that are challenging and complex.

We will look at using third party partnerships, including community-based organizations, State and local government agencies, and attorneys, to strategically develop and place self-service options where they best fit.

21. Online Service Channeling

ASP Goal 2, Obj. 1: Increase the Use of Our Online Services

ASP Goal 3, Obj. 4: Make Our Administrative Operations Even More Efficient

ASP Goal 3, Obj. 3: Maintain Accurate Earnings Records

As our workloads increase and our staffing and budgets decline, we expect it will become increasingly difficult to provide each of our many services via multiple service channels. Doing so is not only inefficient, but is becoming prohibitively expensive.

We believe we must address this issue by using technology and channeling some services to the Internet exclusively. Over the next several years, we will determine whether the Internet should be the primary service delivery mechanism for certain business. We will also require attorneys and authorized representatives to conduct business with us in an online environment. This will be a long term process, one we expect to accomplish in the next six to ten years.

22. Fees for Services

ASP Goal 2, Obj. 1: Increase the Use of Our Online Services

ASP Goal 3; Obj. 4: Make our Administrative Operations More Efficient

We receive thousands of requests for information that, while important to the requesting individual, do not directly correlate to our mission-critical operational needs. Such requests for non-program purposes include:

- Establishing earnings amounts and/or verifying the existence and durations of employment relationships for private pension purposes;
- Providing information needed for use in civil litigation, (e.g., Asbestosis claims, discrimination suits), or for other purposes not related to Social Security programs; and
- Providing income information for workers' compensation.

With these requests, we incur costs associated with employee time, overhead, postage, folder retrieval, remittance processing, and management review. To avoid absorbing the costs of processing these requests, we charge a fee to deliver the requested materials. Although we may decline to charge a fee to avoid disadvantaging low-income individuals, we recently standardized the fees we charge for processing many of our non-program-related requests (*see Initiative 5. Third-Party Requests and Payments*). Examples of services for which we may charge a standard fee include:

- Copying folders (electronic or paper);
- Forwarding letters;
- Manually performing a Social Security Number verification for a third party; and
- Responding to requests for a W-2 or W-3 for Social Security benefits received.

Over the next 10 years, we will standardize fees for other services for which we may already charge. We will also consider whether it is appropriate to charge fees for certain services for which we do not currently charge a fee, especially where we have created new service delivery channels that perform the same service more efficiently.

Conclusion

Throughout the past decade, our ability to deliver high-quality service is challenged by increasing workloads and limited resources. Even with consistent year-over-year increases in employee productivity, our staff could not keep up with the rising workloads. The average time claimants waited for a disability hearing decision rose steadily, and in many locations, average wait times for a hearing exceeded 800 days. Sadly, some claimants waited as long as 1,400 days – nearly four years – for a decision. We were also forced to dramatically cut the amount of program integrity work we did during these years.

From FYs 2008 to 2010, Congress provided funding at or above the requested level and, in 2009, as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, provided us with additional funds to tackle the surging number of retirement and disability applications we receive. This funding allowed us to reverse many negative trends, significantly improve service and stewardship efforts, and absorb huge increases in workloads due to the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. We dramatically lowered the average wait for a hearing decision, reversed the decline in program integrity work, and improved services agency-wide. We made remarkable progress.

Today, we are again facing appropriations below the President's request, and we are once again making difficult decisions. We implemented a hiring freeze, which prevented us from replacing the thousands of employees lost through natural attrition. We reduced our field office hours so that our employees can complete late-day interviews and claims work without using overtime. Additionally, we continue to consolidate and collocate offices to reduce costs and maximize our limited staff resources. We also discontinued or temporarily suspended certain services, such as the mailing of Social Security Statements.

In addition to reducing our costs in this manner, we are also using technology and policy changes to make our work processes more efficient. Our many automation initiatives have helped us become more productive.

This Plan contains many initiatives that will help us become a more efficient and effective organization in the future. The initiatives will fuel future productivity increases and reduce costs. Our work is complex. We need to maintain a highly skilled cadre of trained employees in our offices across the nation to complete our complex and labor-intensive work, while we continue to automate our simpler tasks.

None of the work we receive is discretionary. We must handle every application that comes to us, every change of address, every direct deposit change, every workers' compensation change, every request for a new or replacement Social Security card. The longer it takes us to complete this work, the more it will cost us to do so, which increases the likelihood that backlogs will develop. Receiving adequate funding levels to keep up with the work will ultimately cost less money than delaying the work. Investing in future initiatives will allow us to produce quality services at the lowest possible cost. We need to continue to be a good investment for the citizens who depend on our services.

In summary, the public interacts with us during the most difficult points in their lives, after the loss of a loved one, or when someone becomes disabled. Proper funding allows the agency to provide the proper safety net for the times the public needs us the most.

Along the way, we will continue to face tough choices and trade-offs. Having insufficient resources may mean we must further reduce office hours, defer workloads, and engage in other cost-saving activities. We will do what we can to spread out any additional budget cuts across our organization in a way that is fundamentally fair and manageable for all of our customers. Our challenge is to complete work today and, at the same time, to execute a long-term service delivery plan to gain efficiencies for the future.