

COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20515

May 16, 2022

The Honorable Gail S. Ennis
Inspector General
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21235

Dear Inspector General Ennis:

We appreciate the Office of the Inspector General's (OIG) recent report, "The Social Security Administration's Telephone Service Performance," and write to request that the OIG conduct a follow-up review of the ongoing performance of, and disruptions to, the Social Security Administration's (SSA) multiple telephone systems.

SSA's telephone systems are an essential way for the public to reach the agency for information and assistance with benefits, Social Security numbers, and other vital services. However, SSA has for many years operated three separate legacy telephone systems for its national 800-number, field offices, and headquarters. SSA is working to replace these systems with a modern, unified telephone system through its Next Generation Telephony Project (NGTP). When fully implemented, NGTP is expected to improve telephone customer service by merging the three legacy systems into a single platform designed to be more efficient, stable, and functional. However, this needed upgrade was delayed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In March 2020, when SSA limited in-person field office service to ensure the safety of the public and its employees, the telephone became the primary option for members of the public who needed to interact with SSA employees. To accommodate remote operations, SSA implemented workarounds to its legacy telephone systems that modified functionality and capacity. Since then, SSA has seen an increase of approximately 55 million calls per year (40 percent) from 2019 to 2021.

Despite the April 7, 2022 reopening of SSA's offices to the general public, the agency continues to encourage the public to call for help or to schedule an in-person appointment, and many still rely on SSA's telephone services as a primary service channel. However, we have recently received reports of substantial telephone service disruptions and are concerned about the impact these have on the American people's ability to access telephone services and schedule in-office appointments. Given the continuing importance of telephone services even as in-person services resume, we request a report addressing the following questions:

1. Describe each of the telephone system disruptions SSA experienced including:
 - a. When did disruptions occur, and for how long?

- b. Which of SSA's three legacy systems were impacted (national 800-number, field offices, and/or headquarters)?
 - c. What impact did the disruptions have on the public's ability to conduct business with SSA? How many calls went unanswered? How many calls waiting in queue were dropped? Were callers able to use the telephone system's automated services?
 2. Has SSA and/or its vendor(s) determined the cause(s) of the disruptions and resolved them?
 - a. If yes, describe the cause(s) and what mitigation actions SSA or the vendor(s) took to restore service. Additionally, explain what SSA and its vendor(s) have done to identify what excessive call volume preventative or diagnostic capabilities could better protect the system and ensure uninterrupted telephone access to SSA.
 - b. If no, provide reasons why and when SSA and/or its vendor(s) estimate the disruptions will be resolved.
 3. Does SSA or its vendor(s) have redundant or backup systems so that services can be restored quickly in the event of disruptions? If not, why not?
 4. What are SSA and its vendor(s) doing to prevent the recurrence of outages and respond to future disruptions? Describe system controls in place to prevent outages and/or to restore service quickly when they occur.
 5. Does SSA's contract(s) with its vendor(s) allow SSA to recover costs related to service disruptions in the event of an outage? If not, why not?
 6. Does SSA have a service level agreement with its vendor(s)? What are the responsibilities of SSA and its vendor(s), respectively, for ensuring the continued availability of the telephone system?
 7. Provide detailed information on the telephone system contract(s) with the vendor(s), including:
 - a. The status of the transition to and full implementation of one unified telephone system;
 - b. Obstacles delaying the transition and full implementation. Include information on actions SSA or the vendor(s) have taken as well as the status and timing of actions to be taken to address outstanding barriers to full implementation; and
 - c. SSA's plans to further review or amend the contract with the vendor(s).
 8. Provide a comparison of the functionality and capacity for the telephone systems prior to being modified to accommodate remote operations, after modification, and the anticipated functionality and capacity once NGTP is fully implemented.


Letter to Inspector General Ennis

May 16, 2022


Page 3

Thank you for your prompt attention to this request.

Sincerely,



John B. Larson
Chairman
Subcommittee on Social Security



Kevin Hern
Ranking Member (Acting)
Subcommittee on Social Security