

Social Security Administration Operations

Nearly all Americans will depend on benefits from the Social Security Administration (SSA) at some point in their lives. However, years of cuts to SSA’s basic operating funds have hampered the agency’s quality of service and, in turn, hurt hard-working Americans who have earned benefits through their payroll tax contributions.

Adjusted for inflation, SSA’s core operating budget of \$10.5 billion in 2017 is 11 percent below 2010.¹⁵ Funding constraints have in turn reduced its workforce, but the agency’s workload is reaching record highs as baby boomers age and the numbers of applicants and beneficiaries grow — in March 2017, SSA served 8 million more beneficiaries than it did in March 2010. (See Figure 5.)

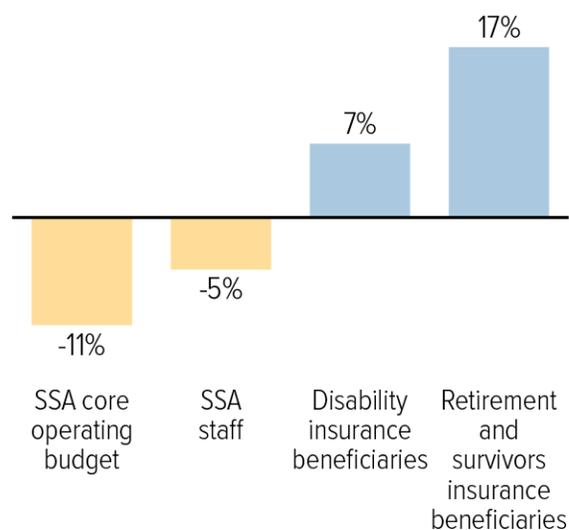
In response to inadequate funding, SSA imposed a hiring freeze in May 2016 and severely restricted overtime. This has further weakened customer service in several ways:

- SSA has lost 1,400 field staff since the hiring freeze began, producing a total loss of 3,200 staff since 2010.¹⁶ As a result, 18,000 field office visitors must wait over an hour for assistance daily.¹⁷ Nearly half of visitors must wait at least three weeks for an appointment.
- SSA’s teleservice centers have 450 fewer agents than necessary to handle the 37 million calls they receive annually.¹⁸ As a result, more than half of callers to SSA’s 800 number don’t get their questions resolved. The average wait time for an agent is 18 minutes, nearly half of callers hang up before connecting, and 13 percent of callers get busy signals. By comparison, in 2010 waits averaged about 3 minutes and busy rates were 5 percent.¹⁹

FIGURE 5

Social Security Administration Faces Increased Workload with Fewer Resources

Percent change from 2010 to 2017 (funding adjusted for inflation)



Note: Figures compare 2010 to latest available (2015 for staff levels, 2017 for all else).

Source: Social Security Administration

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¹⁵ Along with the core funding discussed here, recent appropriation bills have provided extra funds exclusively for program integrity work, a special adjustment that lies outside the 2011 Budget Control Act’s annual spending caps.

¹⁶ Field office staff fell from 30,600 at the end of fiscal year 2010 to 28,400 at the end of fiscal year 2016. As of February 17, 2017, staffing fell to 27,400. SSA, “Field Office Historic Staffing;” National Council of Social Security Management.

¹⁷ SSA, “The State of Services,” December 2016.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ SSA, “Annual Performance Report, 2014-2016,”

http://www.ssa.gov/agency/performance/2016/FINAL_2014_2016_APR_508_compliant.pdf.

- The labor cutbacks have hampered SSA’s ability to complete behind-the-scenes work necessary to evaluate claims and accurately compute benefits, leading to growing delays in processing applications or changing benefits when a beneficiary’s circumstances change. This harms both beneficiaries and taxpayers, as it delays the collection of overpayments and risks never recovering them. The number of pending behind-the-scenes tasks has more than doubled just since the hiring freeze began.²⁰

Furthermore, rising workloads and funding cuts have contributed to a staggering backlog in disability appeals. Denied applicants for Social Security Disability Insurance or Supplemental Security Income who appeal their case must wait at an average of 18 months before an administrative law judge decides their case, an increase of 50 percent since 2010. The number of people awaiting a decision rose from 700,000 in 2010 to a record 1.1 million in December 2016.²¹ These delays come at a high human cost. Appellants can experience financial and medical hardship while waiting; some lose their homes or declare bankruptcy, while others decline in health or die.²²

SSA has developed a multi-year plan to eliminate the backlog and cut wait times for hearings in half and has made initial progress toward reducing the backlog, in part due to dedicated funding that policymakers provided for this purpose in 2017. However, that funding falls short of what the agency plan requires, and increased funding is necessary for further progress.

²⁰ Kathleen Romig, “Cuts Weakening Social Security Administration Services,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, June 3, 2016, <http://www.cbpp.org/research/social-security/cuts-weakening-social-security-administration-services>.

²¹ SSA, “Hearing Office Average Processing Time Ranking Report, FY 2017 (For Reporting Purposes: 10/01/2016 through 01/27/2017),” https://www.ssa.gov/appeals/DataSets/05_Average_Processing_Time_Report.html.

²² Kathy Ruffing, “No Surprise: Disability Beneficiaries Experience High Death Rates,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, April 4, 2013, <http://www.cbpp.org/blog/no-surprise-disability-beneficiaries-experience-high-death-rates>.