

APPENDIX B

United States (U.S) Social Security Administration (SSA) Service Delivery Evaluation

Background

The U.S. SSA administers two major benefit programs: the title II program, which includes retirement and survivors insurance and disability income benefits for workers and their families based on worker contributions; and the title XVI program, or supplemental security income (SSI), which pays a needs-based benefit to the aged and to blind or disabled adults and children.

Administration of SSA programs involves six basic business processes:

- Enumeration
 - Processing new and replacement applications for Social Security identification numbers.
- Posting Earnings
 - Recording workers' annual wages/self-employment earnings and resolving discrepancies in postings.
- Determining Benefit Eligibility
 - Obtaining and adjudicating new applications for benefits for all Social Security programs.
- Processing Appeals on Disputed Cases
 - Reconsidering benefit denials or other adverse actions to determine whether the original decision should be upheld.
- Updating Beneficiary Records with Posteligibility Changes
 - Processing beneficiary reports of changes in circumstances and performing SSA-initiated reviews of continuing eligibility.

■ Responding to Inquiries

- Conducting public information activities, as well as answering specific inquiries about eligibility and benefits.

SSA delivers service face-to-face, by telephone and via written correspondence. The public may choose to contact SSA at one of its 1,300 field offices (FO) or may telephone the local FO or a national 800 number service. On rare occasions where there is a special need, SSA representatives visit at home, in the hospital or at some other location to secure benefit applications or conduct other business.

SSA communicates benefit decisions in writing, issuing a formal notice when the application is adjudicated and whenever any benefit changes occur. Customer requests for information, such as a report of the amount of earnings posted to their records, are also often handled by mail.

Objectives of SSA Customer Satisfaction Surveys

SSA has as our most fundamental goal serving the American public with compassion, courtesy, efficiency and accuracy. In support of this goal, the Agency's Strategic Plan commits SSA to using critical input from the public to improve the ease and convenience of the service we deliver. This commitment led SSA to develop surveys that go beyond straight measurement of customer satisfaction to explore the reasons behind the perception of service.

SSA's service delivery evaluation surveys focus on our most significant interactions with our customers -- enumeration, determining eligibility for benefits and updating beneficiary records with posteligibility changes -- and consider the perception of service in the context of the individual's experience with the Agency. The surveys are designed to:

- Measure satisfaction with the quality of SSA service in performing specific types of business;
- Elicit the reasons behind the perceptions of good or poor service;
- Ascertain public expectations and preferences for service delivery; and
- Provide information on the demographic and programmatic characteristics of the populations that hold particular views.

The ultimate aim of the data collection is to provide insights that will lead to recommendations for corrective actions.

Survey Samples

SSA's sampling mechanisms draw on the Agency's automated data files of beneficiary records to obtain random selections of various types of transactions, such as initial awards of benefits. In addition to providing a means of selecting representative samples of our customers, using these automated records gives us access to demographic information (gender, age, geographic location of residence) and pertinent program data, including benefit type, payment amount, whether the claim was awarded at the initial decision level or on appeal, etc., for analytical purposes.

Sampled individuals are selected at the time the claim or action is adjudicated so that contact for the customer satisfaction survey can be made as close to the actual SSA contact as possible.

Survey Methodology

Survey interviews are conducted by trained SSA interviewers not involved in direct service delivery. Questionnaires are completed by telephone or during face-to-face contacts depending on the characteristics of the sample case.

The survey instruments are tailored to evaluate the type of action selected, with questions geared specifically to that process. In addition, there is a cohort of basic service evaluation questions that appears on all questionnaires so that results from the various different samples can be compared. These questions elicit satisfaction with service overall and with various specific aspects of service, such as employee courtesy, job knowledge, waiting time to receive service in the FOs and processing time to complete actions.

The questionnaires are comprised of rating questions, which generally use 5-point rating scales (e.g., "very good," "good," "fair," "poor," "very poor"), factual questions with response choices offered by the interviewer and open-ended opinion questions. For these, the interviewer records answers in the respondent's own words and then codes them according to a list of anticipated responses (with capacity to code "other" and record narrative).

Data Analysis

Service delivery evaluation survey results are entered into a personal computer data base designed in dBase IV and are then tabulated using the mainframe computer software package (Statistical Analysis System). Raw results are weighted to reflect the universe for the type of action sampled.

Responses to selected items are cross-tabulated with other responses or with pertinent program or demographic data so that

direct comparisons may be drawn. In addition, multivariate analysis of important issues, such as the overall satisfaction rating is performed using the logistic regression technique (LOGIT). LOGIT considers the strength of the relationship between the selected characteristic -- e.g., degree of satisfaction -- and other characteristics of the respondent. LOGIT determines which characteristics are statistically significant and assigns them a weight so that the strongest characteristics can be identified.

Findings About Customer Satisfaction

Survey results indicate that overall, most respondents are satisfied with the service they receive from SSA. But we have been able to gain a better understanding of specifically which groups in our public are more or less satisfied with SSA's service by breaking out their responses by program and by using information from SSA records (e.g., whether benefits were awarded only after the individual appealed the original decision to deny the claim), to gain more insight about their experience.

For example, we found that individuals awarded SSI benefits were consistently less satisfied than others, which may be due in part to the nature of this needs-based program. Taking this a step further, we found that for SSI awardees who had been denied benefits initially and approved only on appeal, this adverse experience had a strong negative impact on the perception of all aspects of service, even courtesy. This analysis points us to areas of focus for efforts to improve service.

We also gained insight about customer satisfaction by using LOGIT to analyze the overall rating of service. To determine which customer characteristics were most significant, we developed a LOGIT model explaining the overall rating based on various survey responses and program and demographic data about the respondents. We found that for all of our major customer types, the factors that had the greatest impact on the perception of overall service were the ratings of employee courtesy, job knowledge and the time it takes SSA to process actions. Respondents who rated these aspects of service highly were most likely to rate overall service highly as well. In addition to explaining the overall service rating, this type of analysis tells us what is most important to our customers.

Finally, we ask respondents to explain why they felt service was only "fair," "poor" or "very poor" when they have rated any particular aspect of service that way. These narrative responses may provide clues for corrective actions.

Awareness and Preference for Service Delivery Options

The survey contained questions asking respondents about the service delivery methods they had used, their awareness of the availability of other options and their preferences for the

future.

Many who had visited FOs for face-to-face interviews were unaware that they could have conducted their business by telephone and expressed a preference for using the telephone in the future. Analysis by type of benefit received and geographic location of residence revealed significant differences among the various respondent groups regarding these issues.

Similar analysis shed light on awareness and preferences for other services SSA offers, such as interview appointments and direct deposit of benefits to a bank account.

Analysis of SSA services used also provided insights about the way service was rated. For instance, respondents who visited FOs were asked to rate (on a 5-point scale from "very good" to "very poor") the amount of time they had to wait to receive service. Those with an appointment for the interview gave much more positive ratings than those without, supporting SSA's policy of promoting the use of appointments.

Other Management Information

The service delivery evaluation also provides valuable management information about the diverse populations SSA serves and any special needs they might have.

For instance, providing quality service to our growing non-English speaking populations is an issue of current concern to the Agency. Therefore, the survey includes questions about language preference and related issues such as how non-English speakers conduct their business with SSA and any problems they encounter. Through the analysis of survey results, we were able to identify which of our workloads and which of our field components have been most affected by the need to provide service to non-English speakers and what languages are involved. We can compare the service ratings of English and non-English speakers to find any inconsistencies in the levels of service we provide.

The survey elicits similar information about other special populations such as the hearing impaired and those who have limitations that make it difficult to interact with SSA.

Survey Instruments

Four survey instruments are used to conduct the SSA customer satisfaction surveys:

- Service Delivery Questionnaire - Initial Awards
- Service Delivery Questionnaire - Initial Denials/Disallowances
- Service Delivery Questionnaire - SSI Redeterminations
- Service Delivery Questionnaire - Enumeration

Facsimiles of these surveys follow.