

Social Security pulls field office staff to answer overwhelmed phone line

The agency, which serves 73 million beneficiaries, has struggled to improve customer service amid cutbacks, long wait times and a crashing website.

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The Social Security Administration is surging staff to its customer service phone operations in the latest effort to address a massive influx of calls that has overwhelmed its struggling 1-800 number.

The agency said it is temporarily reassigning about 1,000 customer service representatives from field offices to work on the swamped toll-free phone line, increasing the number of agents by 25 percent. Social Security's new commissioner, Frank Bisignano, is attempting to reduce phone wait times after customers complained of dropped calls, the website has repeatedly crashed and thousands of workers left the agency under the cost-cutting U.S. DOGE Service.

But Jessica LaPointe, president of Council 220 of the American Federation of Government Employees, said the move will slow responses to the complex cases that the field office employees handle and be only a temporary bandage for the phone problems. The union said it has heard from workers at several offices that no longer have customer service representatives available due to the change.

"The 1-800 number — they do offer a critical role at the agency, but it's triage, whereas customer service representatives actually clear work for the agency," LaPointe said. "So it's just going to create a vicious cycle of work not getting cleared, people calling for status on work that's sitting because the claims specialists now are going to have to pick up the slack of the customer service representatives that are redeployed to the tele-service centers."

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Social Security spokesman Stephen McGraw said that the change affects 4 percent of field office staff and that it isn't clear how long it will last.

"The agency expects that successful implementation of this initiative will accelerate the improvement in the 800 Number average speed of answer so far this year," McGraw wrote in an email, referring to the amount of time a caller has a phone to their ear. "Beyond enhancing service on the 800 Number, this initiative supports the agency's broader customer service strategy by enabling more flexible, real-time allocation of staff to meet the most pressing service demands."

Social Security, which serves 73 million beneficiaries, has attempted to improve customer service in other ways as well, such as moving the phone agents' hours to an 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. schedule — ending a more flexible system that allowed employees to work any span of eight hours between 7:30 and 5:30 p.m. But that initiative has accomplished little except to drive down morale, employees said, while disability and retirement advocates said the phone experience has worsened. Last month, the [agency stopped publicly reporting the toll-free number's call wait times and other performance metrics](#), which Bisignano later told lawmakers might discourage people from calling and getting help.

Through a phone system that rolled out last year, about 90 percent of callers now use a callback feature that lets them wait for a representative without staying on hold or use automated self-service options. Thirty percent of the calls require no employee intervention, McGraw said.

Social Security officials said the callback feature has given people the option to not wait on the phone as long, resulting in those customers spending less time actually on the phone.

However, internal statistics obtained by The Washington Post show Social Security is struggling to handle the number of calls coming into the 1-800 number — which have risen since President Donald Trump took office.

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The agency has seen more than 8.6 million calls each month on average between January and June 2025, the data show. Calls peaked at more than 10 million in March, apparently driven by fears among many elderly recipients that DOGE was intent on reducing their benefits, as The Post previously reported. There were also more calls after the January implementation of the Social Security Fairness Act, which increased the size of some beneficiaries' checks. The agency's new phone system also has capacity for more calls.

By contrast, for the same time period in the last year of the Biden administration — January to June 2024 — the number of average monthly calls was about 6.6 million, the data show.

At the same time, the amount of time that callers who ring the national number wait on hold or in a queue before speaking to an agent has risen. For the last three full months of the Biden administration, callers waited an average of 75 minutes. For the first five months of the Trump administration, callers have waited an average of 93 minutes.

The agency instituted a new phone callback system in late 2024, meaning there is no comparable wait-time data from earlier in the Biden administration. The early months of the year tend to see higher call volumes and higher wait times every year, McGraw said.

This is not the first time that Social Security has repositioned employees to handle greater demands on the system. In April, the agency said it had reassigned about 2,000 employees to what it considered "front line" positions in an effort to increase staffing in more public-facing roles. The crop of inexperienced administrative and technical employees were pulled from central offices in a bid to repair staff losses, sowing confusion all around, The Post previously reported.

Social Security has aimed to shed 7,000 positions, reducing the workforce to 50,000. Forty of the agency's approximately 1,200 field offices lost at least a quarter of the office staff, and a dozen lost more than a third, according to early April figures listed on a [now-deleted agency webpage](#).

Kathleen Romig, a former Social Security official who is now at the left-leaning Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, said the move shifting employees to the phones is unsurprising considering the greater public scrutiny of wait times and a diminished staff that has left leaders with fewer options. Romig has estimated that there are now 1,480 beneficiaries for each staff member — an unprecedented workload compared to the ratio of 480 beneficiaries for every staff member in 1967, the last time Social Security had this few employees.

"You start running the agency with not enough people to go around, then the only way you can get on top of a problem is to play musical chairs like this," Romig said.

Several Social Security employees agree that shifting staff around will fail to repair the main problem: The agency let go of too many staffers.

“They forced the early retirement of thousands of people, and this is the result,” said one employee in a field office, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal.

Worse, the field office employee said, the change will probably slow the agency down in other ways. Because of the shift, several staff in their office will now have to spend their time working the phones instead of working on claims, the employee said.

“So look for claims processing times to increase, and wait times for appointments,” the employee said.

McGraw said field offices have claims representatives who can help with the customer service representative’s workload.

The staffing changes come shortly after Bisignano instituted another change: In late June, Social Security implemented a policy requiring all phone agents to be in their seats answering phones from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, according to the analyst and records obtained by The Post.

The idea behind the change was to ensure all phone agents start sufficiently early so that calls never build up, the analyst said. But ironically, it has instead meant fewer agents are available first thing in the morning, because workers are now prevented from starting their jobs at 7:30 a.m., as they were able to do under the prior flexible system, the analyst said. In the roughly three weeks since the change, phone answering speed has not improved, the analyst and internal data show.

The latest revision, moving staff around to answer phones, “is just shuffling deck chairs, robbing Peter to pay Paul. ... Bisignano is throwing whatever he can at the problem to make the speed of answer number look better,” the analyst said. “We’re trying to fix one problem by creating a new one.”

What readers are saying

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