



FRONTLINE

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"The last year has been especially hard and I constantly worry that I am not providing the service to my office that it needs. I realize I am not Superwoman, but I care about what needs to be done..."

National Council of Social Security Management Associations, Inc.

The Results Are In! Lack of Staff Cited As Primary Problem

By Bethany Paradis, Boston Region

NCSSMA recently released the results of its sixth national Survey of Management. People who keep up with current events in the news will not be surprised to see that front line Social Security Administration (SSA) managers see insufficient staffing as the primary crisis the agency faces. As NCSSMA President Greg Heineman points out in the Survey's introduction, "79.4% of managers state they do not have adequate staff to keep up with the work assigned to their office, a figure virtually unchanged from the 2007 Survey. They report increased waiting times and reduced levels of Field Office phone service. This is happening despite deferring actions on major workloads such as medical Continuing Disability Reviews (CDRs), SSI redeterminations, and significant increases in the use of Internet services. Even with these changes, backlogs are growing and service is declining."

SSA is not alone in this crisis. As *The Washington Post* pointed out in a recent story entitled, "Staffing Shortages Fuel Agency Failures," blame for the Madoff scandal and the salmonella outbreak linked to peanut products was placed squarely on the shoulders of the SEC and FDA respectively for lack of oversight. The article further stated, "Several federal agencies and cabinet departments that have experienced staffing shortages and funding cuts now face questions about why they were unable to stop issues related to the health, safety and financial security of Americans. The answer at all of those agencies seems, in part, to be related to a lack of resources -- an answer unacceptable to some. But following eight years of an administration that cut the funding and responsibilities of many agencies and departments while focusing most of its attention on national security concerns, it's an answer Americans have to accept and a challenge the Obama administration eventually will have to confront."

SSA Field Offices (FOs) and Teleservice Centers (TSCs) provide direct service to millions of U.S. citizens and legal aliens. From NCSSMA's perspective, the men and women who manage these facilities are in the best position to identify the obstacles and challenges they face in trying to provide these essential services. In 2001, NCSSMA decided that the best way to gather this information was to conduct a Survey of its members. The information obtained was invaluable in painting a picture of the reality of life on the front line for agency leadership and those outside the agency that were involved in making decisions affecting SSA.

The 2009 Survey of Management had 1,520 participants with a wealth of experience -- 64.4% have worked for SSA for at least 20 years.

Despite the hardships and challenges they face day to day trying to do more with less, 75.3% rated their job satisfaction as high or very high.

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Survey continued

These are dedicated employees who deeply care about what they do:

"...Most of us came to this profession because we care about people. We are left trying to take care of our people, both employees and claimants, and sadly find ourselves lacking. We want to give our best for our communities, but we need to be given the tools to do that job. I still love my job, but I am saddened that I help put stress on overworked employees to try to serve our public."

Inadequate staffing was found to have a significant negative impact on FO telephone service and waiting times, employee training and overall quality of the work being produced. **84.6% of FO managers reported that their offices do not provide adequate telephone service which results in chronic complaints from customers who encounter excessive busy rates.**

"...The public has tremendous difficulty getting through and then they are frequently asked to hold while other calls are answered and put on hold..."

"We realize answering and returning phone calls will prevent excess walk-in traffic but we don't have the staffing to do both."

Waiting times have increased according to 67.2% of respondents.

"...Because of limited staff and the pressure to improve appointment availability these visitors often wait two or three hours to be seen. Four hours is not uncommon, and our record wait is seven hours."

"It is difficult to assess waiting times when, during much of the day, visitors must wait in lines outside the building just to get inside. We average 380 walk-ins per day, but our reception area holds only 64 people..."

Employee training is suffering. Only 49.1% of Survey participants agreed or strongly agreed that their staffs received adequate training.

"We must make use of the hours that we are not open to the public to get the work completed. We are lucky to allow one hour a week for training. This is a shame for the employees and the public who will end up with poor service due to this..."

"Workloads and the requirement to be on the phones is the number one reason we aren't well trained. New instructions come out for Teleservice Representatives (TSRs) several times a week. We can not take TSRs off of their phones for each new instruction. During peak months we typically do not have any training. We could go two or three months without training because of our workloads."

33.6% of managers indicated that the quality of the work produced in their offices was worse or significantly worse than it was two years ago.

"No matter how one defines quality, accuracy, timeliness, efficiency, courteous and personal service, we're missing the mark. We're pushing through just because there are no alternatives."

"The constant pressure to meet appointment goals, coupled with our walk-in and telephone traffic, not only exceed the limits of our ability to monitor newer employees, but also the capacity to spend thoughtful time researching unfamiliar issues. There is always a drumbeat: just get it done, just get it done."

Online Services:

The Agency's eServices Initiative has provided members of the public with an

alternative service option: to conduct business from the convenience of one's own home. This clearly helps to reduce telephone and in-office traffic, but these Internet claims need to be imported, reviewed and adjudicated. The majority of them require employees to recontact the applicants for additional information before they can be processed. The rapid growth SSA is experiencing in the online arena further strains employees' abilities to handle workloads that are growing exponentially.

NCSSMA has several recommendations for alleviating the problems highlighted in the Survey. Adequate funding is number one. The fiscal year 2009 budget is a step in the right direction and the level proposed by the President for 2010 will greatly help. Ensuring that additional funding provided to SSA is sufficiently directed to the front line - Field Offices and Teleservice Centers - is critical. Revision of the current resource allocation methodology is also needed to better address the disparity in waiting times among offices and the overall high Field Office telephone busy rates that prevail.

Finally, NCSSMA supports the agency's efforts to improve Internet services and to continue to develop new applications that will decrease the back-end work required of employees. Acting on these recommendations will bring SSA closer to being able to effectively meet the ever-changing needs of the public that we are proud to serve.

A Busy and Productive Quarter for NCSSMA

Greg Heineman, NCSSMA President

President's Corner



“NCSSMA leadership cannot do any of this work without your support.”

“NCSSMA is viewed as a strong and credible voice and your support by your own membership and adding new members is a great way to make our voice even stronger.”

The first quarter of 2009 has been very active! During this time, NCSSMA leaders held meetings with the President-Elect's Transition Team, the Government Managers Coalition, Commissioner Michael Astrue, Deputy Commissioner of the Office of Disability Adjudication and Review David Foster, and Deputy Commissioner of Operations (DCO) Linda McMahon. In addition, the NCSSMA Executive Committee made its annual trip to visit lawmakers and staff on Capitol Hill, holding 61 separate meetings discussing issues of importance to NCSSMA. Rick Warsinsky also testified on behalf of NCSSMA before a joint hearing of the House Ways and Means Social Security and Income Security Subcommittees, making a strong case for additional resources for SSA in general and Field Offices and Teleservice Centers in particular. We also completed and compiled our 2009 NCSSMA Survey of Management (featured in the story on the front page of this edition of *FrontLine*). Sometimes, our members may wonder if these efforts are worth it. Let me list several events that have occurred over this past period that I am confident WOULD NOT have happened without NCSSMA's efforts:

- SSA will receive over \$1 billion in Stimulus Bill funding to start replacement work for the National Computer Center, improve our health IT initiatives, and provide additional resources (hires) to SSA to reduce backlogs.
- SSA received \$126.5 million over President Bush's recommended level of funding in the FY 2009 Omnibus Bill to continue our work on reducing backlogs and to increase resources for addressing Program Integrity workloads. This is the second consecutive year that SSA received more than the President's Budget Request from Congress.
- President Obama's FY 2010 Budget Request included a proposed 10% increase in SSA's administrative budget to \$11.6 billion. Budget Committee leaders in both the House and Senate assumed this funding level in their respective Budget Resolutions. While there is much work

ahead related to the FY 2010 appropriations process, these actions are additional proof that our message is getting through.

- On the agency front, over 1600 hires have gone to Field Offices so far this year. DCO is expecting to see about 1200 more hires during a second wave of hiring this summer.
- NCSSMA has brought forward your concerns about the Telephone Service Replacement Project installation process, and is in discussions with agency leaders to improve the process.
- NCSSMA continues to engage agency leaders on Classification, Training and a wide variety of other issues that are of concern to members around the country.

NCSSMA doesn't do any of these actions by themselves. On the Hill, we work closely with SSA, advocacy groups, Members of Congress and Congressional Staff to make our case. Inside the agency, we work with staffers in both Regional Offices and Central Office to get needed changes accomplished. NCSSMA leadership cannot do any of this work without your support. Your support includes your feedback on the Survey of Management, any letters you write in support of our initiatives, and especially now, any additional members you can bring into our regional associations to grow our membership base.

Each region works in their own way to increase their membership rolls. If you know of a new Operations Supervisor or other management person who should join NCSSMA, contact your area representative to find out how to sign that person up. NCSSMA is viewed as a strong and credible voice, and your support by your own membership and adding new members is a great way to make our voice even stronger.

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NCSSMA Visits NADE by Bethany Paradis, Boston Region

On February 27, 2009, NCSSMA President, Greg Heineman attended a National Association of Disability Examiners (NADE) meeting in Washington, DC. He was accompanied by Fred Bourjaily, NCSSMA Vice President and Rachel A. Emmons of Greystone Group, NCSSMA's Washington Representative. The purpose of the meeting was to share information on issues of common interest which included SSA's budget, eServices, the i3368PRO and the status of elimination of the SSA-827. They were greeted by Georgina Huskey, NADE President, Jeffrey Price, Legislative Director/Past President (NADE) and Susan Smith, NADE President-Elect. The increase in Disability claims and the impact on both the Field Offices and Disability Determination Services (DDS) was discussed.

The effect of the furlough of DDS employees in California and other states was also discussed. Huskey, who is from California, described the havoc that furloughs of DDS employees in California were having on production. If FO employees work on a Saturday following a Friday that DDS employees are furloughed the work pending on Monday is overwhelming. She also explained that operational money has not increased since 2006 which is further exacerbating their problems as it is hindering their ability to pay for Consultative Examinations that may be needed to process a Disability Claim. Overall the meeting was found to be very helpful in enlightening both NCSSMA and NADE about the concerns that each group has. Both parties agreed to continue to work together on common issues and to keep the lines of communication open.

The Teleservice Connection by Barb Perian, TSC Representative



Waiting rooms with standing room only, increased office wait times and unanswered Field Office (FO) phone calls – just a few indications that FO staffs are extremely busy. I could go on and on but we are all familiar with the FO situation, but what do you know about the Teleservice Centers (TSCs)? The 800 Number (800N) Network has been busy, too!

In FY 2008 the 800N received 57 million calls. That's 57 million calls that did not reach the FO! In FY 2008 the TSCs processed over 52.7 million transactions. That's over 52.7 million transactions that the FO did not have to handle! Each year the 800N Network handles more transactions than the previous year. FY 2008 saw a 29% growth over FY 2007 and so far this year transactions are up over 14%.

The 800N has also been understaffed. There are a specific number of agents that the 800N needs to efficiently handle calls received in the 800N Network. This number is commonly referred to as the "floor." For the last several years we were under the "floor." Fortunately with the budgets SSA received last year and this year, the 800N has been able to hire again. This year the 800N hired 332 agents, replacing losses and bringing the levels closer to the "floor." These new employees will be trained and ready to answer calls by October 1st in time for our busiest call period. Our 800N agents are ready to take over 57 million calls and process well over 53 million transactions again this year meeting the public's needs and doing our part to support the FOs.



Profiles Page Featuring David Foster

By Sue King, Chicago Region and Leslie McAuley, Northwest Region

Welcome to our series of ongoing conversations designed to enable our membership and other interested readers to get acquainted with members of the executive staff in Central Office. In this edition, Communications Committee members Sue King and Leslie McAuley sat down with David Foster, the recently-appointed Deputy Commissioner for the Office of Disability Adjudication and Review.

In May 2007, Commissioner Astrue testified before the Senate Finance Committee about the massive hearings backlogs facing SSA. How are you improving the hearing procedures and what automation are you utilizing to gain efficiency?

In terms of improving procedures, there are a number of initiatives. Our first target is reducing aged cases. In FYs 2007 and 2008, we nearly eliminated cases over 1000 days old and cases over 900 days old. This fiscal year, we will eliminate cases over 850 days.

Second is our Senior Attorney program in which Senior Attorneys review cases and recommend likely allowances. Under this program, Senior Attorneys issued 25,000 decisions last year and this year's target is 32,000, which we are on track to meet.

Third, we are expanding our current screening initiative to identify possible on-the-record decisions. We are testing a more refined process to identify cases that have current medical information on file. In addition, OQP continues to assist us with our screening initiative and will soon have a total of 80 screeners assigned to this initiative.

There is a litany of automation initiatives: Video conferencing is set up in every hearing office; the Electronic Standardized Business Model (a compilation of best practices) is in 12 hearing offices and soon will be rolled out to other offices; the Centralized Printing and Mailing Process centralizes the mailing of notices and frees up staff time for other duties; eSignature allows ALJs and Attorney Adjudicators to sign decisions electronically; and the Suite of Services integrates in a secure Internet site representative services, including documenting a representative's appointment, electronically filing an appeal, and viewing hearing level electronic folders.

What is the ultimate goal for processing hearing requests? Do we have the resources to reach this goal?

The ultimate goal is to provide a claimant a decision in an average of 270 days, compared to the current time of

nearly 500 days. We also believe that the level of cases pending needed to support this processing time is about 466,000 cases, based on current workload projections.

Our economic assumptions determine if we have enough resources to achieve this goal. There is a correlation between unemployment and the amount of disability claims filed. The resources we need will depend, in part, on the breadth and length of the recession. Congress has been supportive and appreciates the downturn of the economy and its effect. We are in the process of building a predictive model so that, should things change, we can easily change the assumptions and determine what additional resources are necessary.

How is this focused attention affecting the employees in the ODAR offices?

ODAR has an extremely hard working and dedicated workforce. There is no other staff with which I have ever been associated, that could take on the task of reducing these backlogs. It is more than just pressure on ODAR. It is in the Field Offices and DDSs. Operations has been helping by pulling aged cases. OGC, Budget, Systems, ORDP, and OQP have also helped tremendously. Working the backlogs is really a team effort. I am very pleased with the support from throughout the agency.

How do you respond to the general feeling in the field side of the agency that there are two sets of adjudicative rules?

I am aware of that perception; it is an urban myth. The 12/18/08 final ruling in the Federal Register made clear that there was only one set of adjudicative rules. There is a reason for the perception of differences. When a claim gets to the hearing level, claimants' conditions may have worsened since it was at the DDS level, or more evidence may be presented at the hearing level. It is important to me that there is one SSA, making it all a seamless process. Kelly Croft, Linda McMahon, David Rust and I regularly discuss how we can further integrate the disability process.

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The Federal Long Term Care Insurance Program™

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David Foster continued

How has Video Teleconferencing been working?

We are pleased with this technology. Video teleconferencing (VTC) allows ODAR to improve its service to the public primarily by providing increased access to a hearing, and both processing time and travels costs are lowered with VTC hearings. We currently have 636 video units installed throughout ODAR, and plan to increase that number over the next five years. In FY 2008, ODAR conducted approximately 56,000 video hearings and, so far this fiscal year, we have conducted 29,694 VTC hearings.

A study by the Office of Quality Performance found that there is no difference between VTC and in-person hearings. We are looking into whether claimant representatives can purchase cheaper equipment, yet still maintain high resolution and protect each individual's privacy.

What are the productivity goals that ODAR offices strive to achieve?

We are different from Operations in that we primarily work on disability cases. The numerics we look at include total dispositions, average processing time, 850 day old cases, and cases over 365 days old. One of the things we want to do is improve the Management Information (MI) that we give to Baltimore and, more importantly, to the regional offices.

In closing, I would like to say this is really the best job! I work with some of the best people in government. I very much believe in ODAR's mission. This part of the agency has had challenges and we are now getting the component up to where it should be operating. A lot of the staff are excited and committed to our goals of driving down the backlogs and shortening a claimant's wait time.



ATTENTION MANAGERS AND SUPERVISORS!

Do You Know What Your Role is in a Potential Systems Access Violation Investigation?

For the first time the agency has set forth how potential systems access violations should be investigated, who should be involved, what steps should be taken, what factors should be considered, and who ultimately determines the punishment to be proposed. Most importantly to us this new guidance makes clear the important role of the local manager in the process. It also encourages the proposing official, for the first time, to both consider and document consideration of the Article 23 just cause factors and the Douglas factors often used by arbitrators, something our managers are not currently trained to do. An excellent training presentation was aired on the LR/ER Hour on 02/12/2009. If you missed it, it is now available on Video on Demand.

LEARN WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW.

The VOD is under National Content, Management—General. It is entitled LR/ER Hour for 02/12/2009.



www.fedsprotection.com

"Tough times never last, but tough people do."

~Robert H. Skuller~

FERS Sick Leave Bill Carries Momentum into the 111th Congress

By Aaron W. Hunter and Rachel A. Emmons, NCSSMA Washington Representatives
Greystone Group



Under the Federal Retirement Reform Act of 1985 (P.L. 99-335), all federal employees that were hired after December 31, 1983 are covered by the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS). Current employees under the FERS system, as opposed to those under the Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS), are not able to receive credit for unused sick leave as of their retirement date. Federal managers see this as a problem that is continuing to grow, with many believing that this stands in the way of maximizing federal workforce efficiency in the years to come.

In a recent survey of FERS and CSRS employees, 85% of CSRS employees said they conserved as much sick leave as possible. On the other hand, 75% of FERS employees said they would use as much sick leave as possible during their last years. Given this fact, it is not at all surprising that the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) estimates this problem currently costs taxpayers some \$68 million a year in lost productivity.

In July 2008, during the 110th Congress, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 1108, the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, which, among other things, would have credited FERS employees for unused sick leave. The legislation would have allowed FERS employees to add all of their unused sick leave to their retirement annuity, just like their CSRS counterparts. It was set up as a phase

in program where those who retired within the first three years after passage would receive 75 percent of their accrued sick leave. The bill was never considered in the Senate.

With the start of the 111th Congress, Representative Jim Moran (D-VA), a long-time supporter of FERS legislation, used momentum from the 110th Congress to again introduce FERS sick leave legislation. In February of this year, Congressman Moran introduced the FERS Sick Leave Equity Act, H.R. 958. This stand-alone bill would have accomplished the same goals as the provision in H.R. 1108 without the three-year phase in. Retiring FERS employees would receive service credit in the computation of their annuities for any unused sick leave at the time of their retirement. A few House members worked to find a vehicle that the FERS sick leave legislation could be attached to as they saw growing congressional support, but did not feel it would move as a stand-alone bill. H.R. 1256, the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act of 2009, a bill by Representative Henry Waxman (D-CA), began to look like legislation, much like the situation in 2008, that the FERS sick leave provision could be attached to. Through hard work by Representative Edolphus Towns (D-NY), chairman of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, and Representative Stephen Lynch (D-MA), chairman of the Subcommittee on the Federal Workforce, the FERS sick leave legislation was combined with H.R. 1256. As a result, H.R. 1256 contains provisions that would create a sick leave credit for FERS employees as well as allow FERS employees who leave the federal government to redeposit their cashed

out annuities if they decide to return to civil service.

On April 2, 2009, the possibility of FERS sick leave legislation becoming law moved one step closer when the House of Representatives passed H.R. 1256 by a vote of 298-112. The next hurdle is now the Senate, where Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA), Chairman of the Senate Health, Education and Pensions Committee plans on introducing a Senate version of the bill sometime after the two-week April recess. Senator Kennedy has commented that even though there will be opposition from Senators like Richard Burr (R-NC), the legislation should have no problem moving quickly through the chamber. Given the fact that it now does not appear that the Senate will hold up the legislation, along with the White House releasing a supportive "statement of administration policy," it is becoming more and more likely that FERS sick leave legislation will become law at some point in 2009.

Employees who are sick should not be penalized for using their leave appropriately. However, the cost of sick leave used by federal employees continues to rise, and the loss of productivity becomes more apparent as there is no incentive for federal employees to conserve sick leave. Finding a way to encourage appropriate use of sick leave is essential. Passage of the FERS sick leave legislation is looking more likely than ever before, providing an additional tool to curb the abuse of available sick leave and to ultimately maximize federal employee productivity by moving away from this "use it or lose it" system that FERS employees are currently under.

eSERVICES SELF-HELP PILOTS by Virginia Schroder, New York Region

SSA is piloting a new service option in some of its Field Offices (FOs) by making available computers that customers can use to access SSA's Internet services. This will allow the public to conduct some business without having to wait to see an SSA employee. Waiting times have been rising with the increase in visitors that FOs are experiencing. It is hoped that by enabling some of these visitors to conduct their business online, it will allow SSA employees to serve more people more quickly. Even a partially completed Internet disability claim can save a Claims Representative (CR) time. There were originally 16 pilot sites. In February and March 2009, 42 more sites were added to the pilot. I thought it would be interesting to see how this pilot is working in these offices and requested feedback from the managers.

SSA employees can visit this link <http://www.socialsecurity.gov/onlineservices/eservices/> to see what the public sees on the screen.

Some offices have more than one computer being used for this pilot. The location of these self-help stations varies from the reception area to the Front-End-Interviewing (FEI) area to a private interviewing room. Some offices dedicated these computers to retirement applicants while other offices had disability applicants complete the i3368 before seeing a CR. Most managers indicated that if customers came in to the office they want to be seen by a CR to file their applications so they are not too interested in filing online after they get there. Thus far, most of these pilot offices are experiencing a maximum of 4 applications completed per day utilizing these computers. There was positive customer feedback with the use of these computers.

Some of the offices stated they are just using the self help pilot for retirement claims, while others are using it for disability claims. A few are using it for both types of claims. Some offices that are using it only for disability claims expressed concern about assisting the claimant on a retirement claim in the self help area and then losing the credit for the work due to the routing of the claim to the ICTU. It was suggested where an office assists the claimant on an RSI claim, that the claim be routed to the local FO.

Some Pros:

- When customers agree to use the computers, it reduces the workload of the CR assigned to walk-in customers that day.
- On busy days, customers that walk in appreciate having an alternative that reduces their wait time.

Some Cons:

- Where computers occupy an FEI window which cannot be used for anything else, it is problematic in very busy offices.
- Some computer glitches with software upgrades are not discovered until the customer tries to access the computers and then is unable to file online. They then have to be referred to a CR to complete the application which creates havoc with interview assignments. This may cause them to wait longer than if they had simply been assigned to a CR in the beginning.

Some Ideas for Improvement:

- Computer workstations should be ergonomically configured for the location where they will be placed.
- Plan for a designated location within the office to set up computers rather than FEI windows. Space needs to be allotted for Self-Help stations in the Space Allocation Standards to ensure there is sufficient room for them in future build-outs.
- Train the entire staff in the process.
- Enable FOs to access and adjudicate all applications filed this way even if routed to the ICTU.
- Create signage and change VIP to direct visitors to these computers for post entitlement (PE) business that can be done online. Perhaps a kiosk-style set up would work well for that purpose so that the visitor can bypass waiting to be screened by an SR for the PE services that are available online.

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eServices continued

Tom MacBride, Division Director, in the Office of Public Service & Operations Support, Division of Operations Analysis & Customer Support said they will be conducting a survey of all sites starting 4/6/09 to evaluate customer use of the Self Help PCs. He is "anxiously waiting to see the results." Here is the link to the survey:

<http://denet.kc.ssa.gov:4545/Surveys/frmSurvey.aspx?Key=3F5349443D3437362653483D>.



As an SSA employee with over 30 years of experience in field operations, I moved to the Office of Disability Adjudication and Review (ODAR) a year and a half ago as a Group Supervisor. Learning about ODAR operations was fairly easy. I have found the management staff easy to work with and increasingly more focused on achieving operational goals. My field experience has been an asset in helping our office better organize workloads and establish more efficient practices that have enabled us to meet monthly goals.

One major difference I find from field operations is the type of staff positions that exist in ODAR. The employees who prepare a case to be heard by the ALJ are legal clerks who are equivalent in grade to the Service Representative (SR) position. Anyone who has

A Day in the Life of an ODAR Group Supervisor by Sue Rowland, San Francisco Region

supervised an SR unit is familiar with the need for ongoing management guidance on cases that are not routine in nature. Bridge positions into management are nonexistent for these employees. While the potential exists in the field for a development clerk to rise through various positions into management, that is not currently an option in ODAR.

Despite the differences between the field and ODAR components, that old adage, "the more you find different, the more you find the same" holds true. We too have monthly and yearly workload goals like the number of dispositions rendered and an aged case target which, for this fiscal year, is to process all pending cases over 850 days. We also receive ongoing reports throughout the month on various workloads from our regional office. Having been an ASC in the past, I now appreciate all the more their talent and support of field workloads. In ODAR we have no banana/appeals program, no WAC application, no VIP. While

there are many available reports on targeted workloads, I find I spend a lot of time working with raw data in an Excel format that I filter and sort to determine priorities.

While a vast majority of the cases at the hearing level are for disability issues, there are about 20% of the cases that involve non-disability issues. These cases take most of my time in providing assistance with resolving the issue, finding the documentation by the Field Office to support their determination, and determining what documentation is needed before a case can be prepared and scheduled for a hearing.

Increasingly documentation is being maintained electronically. The systems (MSSICS and MCS) that are used daily by the field are not used by ODAR. In fact, the Top Secret/PCOM profile for ODAR employees is limited. It only allows us to access the basic developmental worksheets in the claims path. This makes finding systems stored documentation like the explanation for late filing of the appeal

We welcome your letters, stories, comments, editorials or suggestions for future articles.

Send your feedback to:
Bethany.Paradis@ssa.gov

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ODAR Group Supervisor continued

even more challenging. Even though this limitation has been brought to the attention of regional and central office security components, resolving it is not on anyone's radar screen from what I can tell.

To give you a picture of the ODAR process, here is a brief summary of the steps it takes for a decision to be made on a hearing. The case is first receipted into our system, CPMS, either electronically if a link exists to the e-folder, or manually for paper cases. It then goes to a senior legal clerk to exhibit the documents and prepare the case for the ALJ to schedule. Next the ALJ holds the hearing, in person or by video teleconference equipment. Our office is currently helping another region reduce their backlog and these hearings are done by video teleconferencing. The ALJ annotates the file with the basis for his/her decision and the case goes to an attorney or paralegal to prepare the formal decision. Some ALJs prepare their own bench decision if it is fully favorable. The case then goes to the ALJ to review and sign. The legal clerk then closes the case out in the system, mails the decision to the claimant and transfers the folder to Falls Church or the Field Office.

Our post hearing workload involves a decision on fee petitions if the criteria for a fee agreement cannot be approved at the same time as the favorable decision is made.

One aspect of working in ODAR that I really like is being able to focus on a single workload -- appeals. In the field, there are numerous workloads competing for attention. Just dealing

with the public and meeting their demands is challenging in the field but there is also a variety of different workloads that require the staff to divide their focus and time.

I knew when I moved to ODAR that we were at the forefront of attention from Congress and SSA leadership due to our backlogs. My first few months in ODAR reminded me of what the field experienced a few years back when the effects of downsizing had to be dealt with while still maintaining a high volume and quality of service delivery.

Learning to work more efficiently to do more with less to increase productivity is one thing we all have in common. Over the last year we have made great strides in ODAR. I see the backlogs declining in my office and the staff becoming more focused on the workloads and taking pride in achieving results we never thought possible. When all is said and done, we truly are one agency with a common mission and purpose. I'm just as proud to be a part of ODAR operations at this critical time as I am for the years spent as part of field operations.

**For more information about
NCSSMA visit our web page
at www.NCSSMA.org**



**Save the Date!
November 2-5, 2009
The Atlanta Region
Management Association
will host NCSSMA'S 40th
Annual Meeting in Tampa,
Florida**

The meeting site is the Tampa Hyatt Regency Hotel. Tampa will also host the Super Bowl in 2009 and the city is well known for putting its best foot forward for its guests. You will be impressed with the beauty and ambiance of Downtown Tampa. ARMA is busy planning excursions to one of the Orlando Theme Parks, a tour of Historic Ybor City (<http://www.ybor.org>), and a tour along the Gulf Coast.

The Tampa Bay area has something for everyone, including the Channelside Shopping District, the Seminole Hard Rock Casino, the Henry Plant Museum (<http://www.plantmuseum.com>), and miles of beautiful white sand beaches.

**Please plan to join us in
Tampa**





Ask Mary!

Mary Glenn-Croft has offered to answer questions about anything within the jurisdiction of the Office of Budget, Finance and Management. Please send your questions to Bethany.Paradis@ssa.gov.

CitiDirect Gets an Upgrade

What is the purpose of the new CitiDirect program? From the user's perspective, it simply adds steps for management as we have to log into the new link, then make selections that take us to the old program to allocate our purchases.

CitiDirect is a computer software product that the agency uses to record and properly account for credit card micropurchases. SSA purchased the new CitiDirect system because it provides greater functionality and addresses more of SSA's needs than the previous system. Although it may look to users as if they are logging into the old system, it is actually a new product built with the same user interfaces.

We have heard some complaints and suggestions for improvement and we would like to know if BFM is already working on these issues? If not, can BFM do anything to address the following issues?

We invite any suggestions for improvement that users may have. They can email their suggestions or concerns to: ^OAG PCard Team or to ^OF CitiDirect Contact mailboxes. BFM works diligently with Citibank to address users' concerns as they come to our attention. BFM staff in the Office of Finance and the Office of Acquisition and Grants participates in weekly meetings with Citibank to discuss these concerns and work toward their resolution.

We frequently find that the interfaces are not working properly as we get messages telling us to try again later.

I can see when receiving such a message you may think there is a problem, but the interface is indeed working properly. The message that users receive when trying to reallocate transactions -- "try again later after 1:00 p.m." -- is not an error, but actually results from the timing of the e-mails. Users receive e-mails from CitiDirect about purchases that have been charged to their accounts before the Office of Finance receives the files containing the purchases.

After receiving CitiDirect's e-mail, users need to wait until after 1:00 p.m. that day to perform the reallocations to allow time for the Office of Finance to receive the data concerning the purchases.

The email alerts no longer include the link to the website which is an additional inconvenience.

Citibank tells us that they had to remove the link for security reasons. Also clients complained that the messages were being identified as SPAM so people were ignoring them.

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Ask Mary continued

Neither the DCO Log-on tool, nor the SSO Toolbar has been updated with the new link.

We have been in contact with the appropriate staff in DCO's Office of Automation Support to request that they update the DCO log-on tool and the SSO Toolbar to include the link to the website. The Office of Automation Support agrees that it would be helpful for our managers to have CitiDirect added to SSO and/or DCO Login Assistant. Both SSO and DCO Login have made attempts to add this site to their applications, but the changes to the new CitiDirect site have complicated their efforts. The following technical issues are impacting the installment for both SSO and DCO Login:

- *Technical issues evolved when trying to get one web page to send information over to the CitiDirect login page.*
- *CitiDirect has a two-factor authentication which includes challenge questions; this makes script writing difficult.*
- *There is no training or validation region available for either application to mimic or test against; which means testing against the production site (the site treats this like hacking).*

OAS is collaborating with the SSO and DCO Login teams to try to resolve these issues.

It would be helpful for the Authorizing Officer (AO) to have the option to receive an email alert in the following two situations:

A purchase is charged against your CAN that was not made by your CAN

A purchase was made by your CAN, but charged to another CAN

SSA purchased CitiDirect as a commercial off-the-shelf product. Because CitiDirect was not custom-made for SSA, the product does not contain the data fields necessary to provide such e-mail alerts. However, CitiDirect now posts reallocation transactions to SSOARS every hour, instead of nightly. It is our intent that CitiDirect's hourly postings will provide Authorizing Officers with a quicker means of obtaining management information.

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