



SSA prepares for retiring boomers

Agency officials revamp disability, electronic claim system and call center

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In two years, the first baby boomers will start to collect Social Security retirement benefits, and they will keep retiring in waves for the next 20 years. Is the Social Security Administration ready for them?

In some ways, it is. Systems are already in place to deal with the first boomers who will become eligible for early retirement in 2008. Agency officials have revamped systems to meet the growth in boomers' disability claims, which have steadily increased in the past five years.

But SSA also faces the Herculean job of making its \$1 billion information technology budget stretch to accommodate the influx of retirees.

"We don't project any dynamic [budget] increases in the future," said Tom Hughes, SSA's chief information officer. Instead, he plans to rely on IT efficiency.

SSA's efforts include expanding the electronic disability system and creating an electronic claim application system. The agency is also upgrading its toll-free call center to add enhancements such as voice recognition, and it plans to offer more services via the Internet.

The call center already handles 50 million calls a year, and SSA delivers 50 million checks a month.

"That's a lot of checks," Hughes said. "This is a significant business we have here. Obviously, we'll ramp up for the future."

Mark Forman, former administrator for e-government and IT at the Office of Management and Budget, said SSA has worked to make sure it offers a citizen-centric system. "There is a whole culture there that not only is used to change, but they really have become experts at leveraging technology for customer service," said Forman, now a partner at KPMG's Federal Civilian Preferred Providers Services organization.

To deal with the surge in boomer disability claims, SSA launched new Web services, said Bill Gray, the agency's deputy commissioner for systems.

Until 2001, individuals' files were kept in thick folders containing their medical records from doctors and hospitals. Those materials were stored in caves in the Midwest. SSA now uses a massive electronic storage facility that handles 26 million documents, and it fully backs them up on a mainframe computer. SSA employees can access the data from anywhere.

"Over 85 percent of our examiners are using electronic folders to process claims," Gray said, adding that by this time next year, that figure will be more than 90 percent.

Furthermore, SSA officials are ensuring that their systems can process all claims electronically, including the use of electronic signatures. And they are modifying the agency's Web site to offer many services online. "In tight government budgets, it is not a real possibility to hire more people," Gray said.

Furthermore, he is confident that SSA's database can withstand cyberattacks. So far, no one has penetrated the system, not even people hired by SSA to break in.

"No one can get to our data," Gray said. "We are not being inundated by denial-of-service [attacks] or viruses. We test repeatedly. And if there is a vulnerability, we shut it down."

Michael Leff, a senior program manager at Lockheed Martin IT who oversees a contract to handle SSA's systems integration

work, said the electronic disability and claims systems are quickly moving ahead.

"SSA has had to address capacity requirements and transactional requirements," Leff said. "They have really had to rethink and redefine their IT systems to better understand how they can automate and streamline their disability claims."

The real test will come when SSA reaches its maximum capacity for aging boomers.

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