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Internal Revenue Service (IRS) Report on Pilot Project to Co-locate IRS Facilities at Social Security Administration (SSA) Offices, 2018

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2021-05278

This is a final response to your Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request dated December 19, 2020, received in our office on December 21, 2020.

You asked for a copy of the report on the results of the pilot co-location project relating to the IRS recent (2017-2019) piloted project to co-locate IRS facilities at Social Security Administration sites.

I searched and located 4 pages of documents responsive to your request, and I have enclosed all 4 pages. This grants your request in full.

If you would like to discuss our response, you have the right to contact the FOIA public liaison, Summer Sutherland, at 801-620-2149.

The FOIA Public Liaison responds to FOIA requests for copies of documents maintained by the IRS. There is no provision in the FOIA to resolve tax, collection, or processing issues. If you need assistance with tax-related issues, you can call the IRS at 800-829-1040.

If you have questions, you can contact the person at the telephone number at the top of this letter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Nimmo".

David Nimmo
Disclosure Manager
Disclosure Office 13

Enclosure:
Responsive Records

Field Assistance and Social Security Administration Co-Location Pilot

Prepared for Field Assistance by W&I Research | March 2018

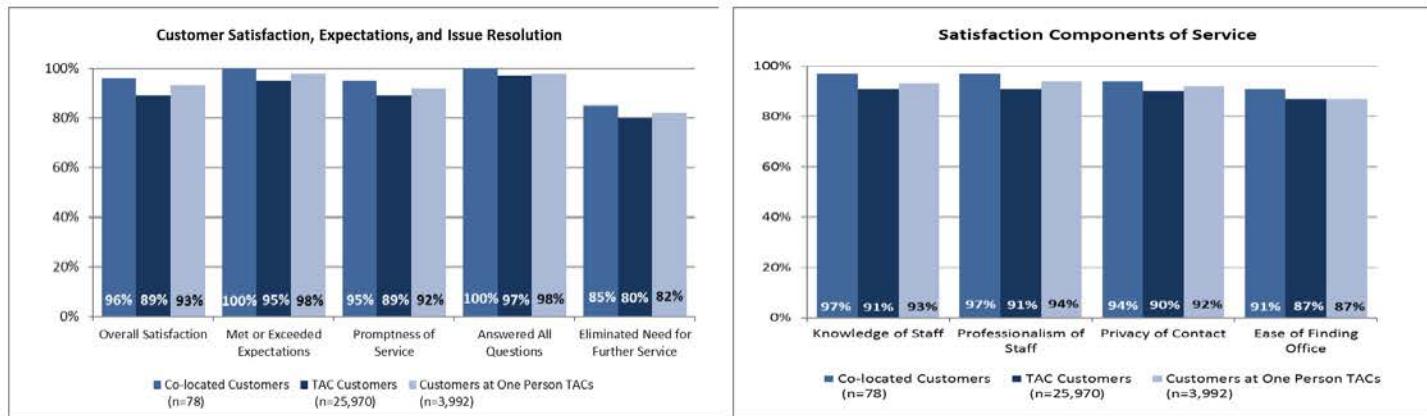
Field Assistance (FA) implemented the Social Security Administration (SSA) Co-location pilot during the 2017 filing season. The pilot provided traditional FA services to customers, outside of Taxpayer Assistance Centers (TACs), at four SSA offices locations: Danville, VA; North Platte, NE; Norwich, CT; and Presque Isle, ME. Data was collected from customers by leveraging the administration of the FA Customer Satisfaction Comment Card; two focus groups were held on July 19, 2017 to capture FA employee and management data. Taken together, the information gathered from the surveys and the focus groups will be used to evaluate the pilot and formulate recommendations for program improvement.

Executive Summary

Findings suggest that service at SSA locations met or exceed the expectations of FA customers, as well as provide issue resolution. Three quarters of the open-ended responses were positive, showing appreciation for the service provided. Employees enjoyed providing service in SSA locations and wish to continue working in the SSA office. Further, they felt the ability to provide FA and SSA service to customers in the same visit was a benefit to customers. Managers approved of employee productivity in the SSA locations, but expressed concerns (e.g., lack of contact recording) with long term management of co-located employees. Both managers and employees felt the onboarding process could be improved, and reported connectivity issues impact service and efficiency.

Customer Feedback

Customers who visited pilot locations were asked to voluntarily complete the same FA Customer Satisfaction survey that is offered to those who visit TACs for face to face service. Approximately 78 pilot customers responded to the FA Customer Satisfaction Survey ("Co-located Customers") between February and April 2017. Survey items center on issue resolution, elements of the service contact, and experience with the FA employee. Findings are compared to FA customers who visited TACs during the same period of time ("TAC Customers"), as well as FA customers who visited TACs with one employee ("Customers at One Person TACs"). *Please note: Because respondents were not required to answer every question, the base (n) can fluctuate from question to question. Caution should be exercised when comparing data from customers at pilot sites (n=78) to results from the population base customer satisfaction survey (n=25,970).*



Satisfaction, Expectations, and Issue Resolution. Pilot participants rated overall satisfaction at 96%. Additionally, participants reported service at SSA locations met or exceeded their expectations (100%), the representative answered all of their questions (100%), and the service visit eliminated the need for additional contact with the IRS (85%). Satisfaction with promptness of service was 95%. FA customers who obtained service at TACs during the same period of time indicated lower overall satisfaction (89%), lower levels of met or exceeded expectations (95%), less answered questions by the FA assist (97%), less service provided that eliminated the need for additional contact with the IRS (80%), and lower satisfaction with promptness of service (89%). Similarly, FA customers who obtained service at one person TACs reported lower overall satisfaction (93%), lower expectations met or exceed (98%), less answered questions (98%), less service that eliminated the need for additional contact (82%), and lower satisfaction with promptness of service (92%) compared to pilot participants.

Select Satisfaction Components. Other key components to assessing FA customer satisfaction with service include the knowledge and professionalism of staff; for both elements satisfaction of pilot participants was 97%. Satisfaction rating for the privacy of contact was 94%, and ease of finding the office was 91%. All of these ratings were higher than the satisfaction ratings provided by FA customers who obtained service at TACs during the same period of time (knowledge and professionalism 91%, privacy of contact 90%, and ease of finding the office 87%). FA customers who visited one person TACs also rated satisfaction lower than customers who visited pilot locations (knowledge 93%, professionalism (94%), privacy (92%), ease of finding office (87%).

Open-Ended Feedback. Customers who visited SSA pilot locations for service and voluntarily participated in the survey were asked to provide open-ended feedback about their experiences. Of the 25 responses provided; 19 responses were positive showing appreciation for the service provided. Some examples include:

- “Happy, happy, happy. Solved so many problems and the agent deserves a raise!”
- “Very compliant all questions answered. Could not have been a better experience.”
- “The service was prompt and professional and very friendly. Thanks...”
- “It is great that they changed the location to [location]. It is more convenient *[sic]* for me.”

The remaining responses pertained to suggestions for improvement such as:

- “Helping walk-ins with better information with their problems. Guy walked in and couldn’t *[sic]* get help. Kind of frustrating for him...”
- “Perhaps make it easier to make an appointment over the phone.”
- “Need Somali interpreter in this office available *[sic]*. If it’s possible, I saw a lot of them coming without appointment.”

Employee Feedback

Four of the employees who provided FA services in SSA locations participated in a focus group to share their experiences with the pilot. Their length of Internal Revenue Service (IRS) employment ranged from 7 to 30 years, with an average of 21 years.

Overall, employees enjoyed providing service in SSA locations, calling it “something different,” “positive,” and “one stop service.” The ability to provide FA service to customers who could then obtain any needed assistance from SSA in the same visit was a benefit to customers. Overall, most employee participants stated they prefer working at the SSA location, rather than in the TAC office, and wish to continue working in the SSA office.

Employees expressed being “apprehensive” prior to the start of the co-location pilot, and that it took a little time to get “acclimated.” The onboarding experience for participants could benefit from enhancements in communication (e.g., timeline, tasks necessary for set-up) and a test period prior to troubleshoot prior to implementation.

- Employees had differing opinions regarding the physical set up during the co-location pilot. Based on descriptions provided, there are differences by SSA office and differences in comparison to TACs.
- Some locations had offices with closing doors which greatly reduced waiting area noise; others required employees provide service through a glass window that was challenging for communicating with customers, especially some seniors.

At least one employee expressed an appreciation for the SSA’s physical set up over the prior TAC. In particular, each assist (FA and SSA) were behind closed doors. Limited customer visibility was believed to reduce taxpayer frustrations with promptness of service. Employees stated they had all the tools needed to provide service in the SSA location. Participants noted most of their TACs were in close proximity to the SSA office, providing a level of comfort if they needed anything. Connectivity issues with air cards and the IRS network forced employees to reboot computers, sometimes multiple times a day, impacting the quality and timeliness of the service provided.

Employees found the SSA staff to be “very welcoming,” “well-prepared,” and “inclusive,” which eased the transition. One participant felt the SSA employees were “the most educated and professional staff they worked with in a long time.” The co-location experience required a learning curve for both the SSA and FA staff. Employees regularly interact with the SSA manager, to touch base and provide regular updates on number of appointments on the schedule. The SSA staff complete a report on the number of hours they spend assisting the IRS staff with appointments.

One area of concern pertained to how FA customers checked-in for service. SSA uses kiosks for check-in and gating; this requires customers to input their Social Security Number (SSN). Not all FA customers have a SSN. It was reported that at times, SSA staff expressed frustration with the way some customers checked-in, using their EIN rather than their SSN at the SSA kiosk. In these instances, the EIN would not show up, complicating the check-in process. The check-in process at each pilot location was manually completed to direct customers with an appointment to FA employees for service.

When asked to describe their perception of the taxpayer experience during the pilot, most participants noted positive feedback from taxpayers and co-location did not appear to be an issue for locations where the TAC and the SSA office are located in the same building (i.e., knowing where to go for service). Further, employees felt the office space and waiting areas were large enough to accommodate FA customers. A participant reported encouraging taxpayers to go into the hall to call and book an appointment for same-day service.

Employees expressed an interest in clarity from leadership on whether or not walk-ins should be provided service when a time slot is available. Some employees noted not all customers are aware an appointment is required, and with customers who travel hours for service without an appointment it is a burdensome. One employee expressed an interest in improving appointment scheduling by refining the amount of time needed for appointments, while another noted the co-location pilot provides more calendar control—allowing for the ability to extend appointment times when necessary.

Managerial Feedback

Eight General Managers and Territory Managers also participated in a focus group regarding their experiences managing co-located employees. Their length of IRS employment ranged from 10 to 30 years, with an average of 25 years.

Managers expressed their employees were “willing” and “enthusiastic” about participating in the pilot. Participants felt the SSA offices were “much nicer in regards to furniture and design,” they “have better equipment” and that they “get information faster,” when compared to the IRS offices. One manager noted from observations the FA assistor fit in well with the SSA office and environment and “There was a level of privacy for the taxpayer even though the taxpayer and ITAS were located next to a SSA employee. It was a good experience and the taxpayers seemed pleased.”

Similar to employee feedback, managers indicated they did not have enough lead time and were scrambling to “get things done” prior to the start of the pilot. The pilot start date kept changing. One participant stated their employee was a last minute addition to the pilot, and another shared they had to drive more than 200 miles to help their employee move furniture and equipment. Additionally, the importance of lead time and allowing a testing period for equipment was expressed. The majority of participants did not share any specific preparations for the pilot. However, one manager reported having to be hands-on with the transition – swapping out computers, setting up a printer, and ordering a cabinet for the employee.

The managers also shared concerns about the connectivity issues their employees experienced during the pilot. Employees reported having “major connectivity issues” while working in the co-location, both with the soft phone and the laptop. One participant stated it took “about a day” to find a good hot spot for connecting to the IRS network. A manager indicated it would be more ideal to have a Wi-Fi system available to FA employees in the SSA office. To address the air card issues, another connectivity option could save the time it is taking employees to reboot when there are issues (i.e., 15 to 20 minutes).

Co-location currently does not allow for contact recording which managers leverage for employee reviews. When absent recordings, FA must incur costs to have the manager travel to the site and conduct an in-person review of service. Subsequently, managers do not have work spaces at the SSA locations in order to work remotely. Another limitation of co-location pertains to mail. SSA cannot process or send FA mail which impacts administrative tasks and correspondence capabilities. Additionally, during the co-location pilot Over the Phone Interpreter (OPI) services were not available, which was also noted in customer feedback.

Compared to employees, managers reported having limited interaction with the SSA employees, but positive relationships with the SSA managers. FA managers were not permitted to engage SSA employees during co-location. Throughout the pilot, FA and SSA managers worked together to resolve issues (e.g., communication regarding leave plans, appointment scheduling).

FA managers were “impressed” by the SSA kiosk, calling it “efficient” and “easy to use.” Several participants felt it would be a great addition to the TACs, but when one inquired about getting kiosks in the TACs, they were told that it was too expensive. Leveraging the SSA kiosk in TACs was discussed during the focus group; one manager felt it could be an opportunity to take current screeners or Initial Assistance Representatives (IARs) and make them junior level Individual Tax Advisory Specialists (ITAS). Focusing back on the co-location pilot, another manager states it would be beneficial to add an IRS option to the SSA kiosk; that way customers could go directly to the IRS employee without having to be routed through the SSA office and their employees.

Implications around limited SSA hours of operation were discussed. Managers noted employees serve fewer customers through co-location. In part, the SSA offices close earlier than IRS offices and are only open partial day on Wednesdays. It was noted at least one of the SSA pilot offices is open from 9AM to 4PM which is different than the TAC was 8:30AM to 4:30PM. Some discussion centered on the ability of TACs to limit hours, like SSA does on Wednesdays, in order to allow employees time for direct learning. Overall, managers did not express concerns with low-productivity from co-located employees, reporting assistors work Correspondence Imaging System (CIS) inventory during down time to stay productive.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the survey and feedback from the focus groups, Research recommends FA consider the following:

Additional Assessments

- **Continue to explore how best to provide FA service via co-location in SSA offices.** Based on preliminary assessments co-location appears to provide value to taxpayers, as well as the government. FA should consider the extent to which SSA co-location may be incorporated into their business model.
- **Determine metrics of success for co-location.** In the event FA is interested in statistical comparisons of service ratings for key business components (e.g., overall satisfaction, expectations, issue resolution, staff performance, and promptness of service) to its overall customer base, Research recommends conducting a more robust assessment beyond the February to April period. FA may want to consider implementing a survey for co-location customers in the event specific data needs are identified that are not included on the FA Customer Satisfaction Comment Card Survey.

Process Enhancements

- **Clarify FA's Leadership's position on walk-in service.** Employees expressed feelings of confusion about whether the FA leadership would like employees to only provide appointment-based service, or if serving walk-in customers are acceptable when there are open time slots. This feedback regarding service prioritization is not limited to the FA SSA pilot; however, Research recommends making an assessment specific to SSA co-location service environments.
- **Improve customer toll-free screening prior to scheduling appointments.** Participants felt the Accounts Management screeners needed to ask more questions when scheduling appointments so they can better utilize the scheduling calendar. Participants noted sometimes 45 minute appointments are scheduled for a task which can be completed within 15 minutes. In order to best utilize shorter availabilities, FA should consider opportunities to work with Accounts Management to improve scheduling.
- **Better prepare employees and managers for the pilot.** Strategically identify pilot locations prior to notifying participants and announcing start dates. Enhance internal communication strategies and ensure that timelines are not last minute. Structure implementations to include a period for testing equipment.
- **Consider reducing the TAC open hours to match the SSA office hours.** Changing the hours TACs are available to the public could benefit both FA employees and taxpayers. Reduced TAC hours would allow the employee uninterrupted time to work CIS inventory and/or direct training activities. Managers believe there may be an opportunity to learn lessons from SSA on how it conveys information regarding operating hours to the public.

Technological Developments

- **Alleviate technology issues prior to co-locating additional employees.** Air card connectivity issues were discussed by both employees and managers. Network issues require the employees to shut down and reboot computers, even if they are in the middle of a customer contact. This ongoing issue impacts the customer service experience, as well as impedes efficiency. FA should consider improvements to connectivity including potential options such as Wi-Fi.
- **Add an IRS button to the SSA kiosk.** Not all FA customers have a SSN. The check-in process at each pilot location was manually completed to direct customers with an appointment to FA employees for service. This would allow taxpayers to begin their service interaction directly with an IRS employee instead of having to first start with a SSA employee.

Logistical Considerations

- **Reconsider how co-located employees are evaluated.** Currently, SSA managers cannot use contact analytics to monitor employee service and complete employee reviews. FA Managers have to travel to the SSA office to conduct "stand behind" reviews, increasing the amount of travel for FA managers. FA may consider other review options to limit travel costs.
- **Address mail capability if the pilot becomes permanent.** SSA cannot send IRS mail. FA should consider how to incorporate mail capabilities at co-locations.
- **Consider how to incorporate Over the Phone Interpreters for co-location services.** Currently over the phone interpreter services are not available at co-location sites. FA should consider how to allow for the incorporation of this service to provide service to customers with limited English proficiency.
- **Consider procuring space in the SSA offices for the FA managers.** Managers currently have to travel to SSA locations for in-person reviews. Additionally, managers generally should be able to make site visits as needed. FA may want to consider procuring space for managers when working remotely at SSA locations.