

OPM customer service problems



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A recent government report sheds light on the problems many retired letter carriers experience when trying to contact the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). The report was issued in September 2016 by OPM's Office of Inspector General. It reviewed the customer service goals and achievements/failures of OPM's Retirement Services department. The report presents a bleak picture.

In FY 2015, OPM's Retirement Information Office received 1.9 million phone calls from Civil Service Retirement System and Federal Employees Retirement System retirees. But it managed to answer fewer than 1.4 million of those calls, leaving more

than half a million calls abandoned and unanswered. It averaged 24,036 busy signals per day.

It appears that written correspondence received by OPM fares no better than phone calls. OPM's general goal is to respond within 60 days of receipt of a letter. But OPM doesn't manage to even *process* many letters to the correct department within that 60-day goal. Between April 2, 2016, and May 7, 2016, OPM started with 5,518 pieces of mail on hand that needed to be processed or forwarded to the appropriate area within OPM. During the same period, OPM received an additional 3,187 letters, processed 3,287, and ended with a balance of 5,418. The average processing time was 122 days.

The reason for this unacceptable level of service is clearly shown in the report. OPM employs one Retirement Information Office customer service specialist for every 27,000 retirees. Compare this with Social Security, which employs one customer service specialist for every 8,000 Social Security beneficiaries. The OPM Retirement Information Office does not have adequate staffing levels needed to provide adequate service to its 2.6 million federal retirees.

OPM responded to the OIG recommendation that it reduce the ratio of customer service specialists to retirees. OPM simply noted that its ability to address call wait times and timely responses to correspondence remains dependent on its ability to fund the necessary customer service specialist positions, and that decreases in budgets have a negative impact on service.

In other words, OPM does not have enough money to provide a reasonable level of service to the retired women and men who devoted their work lives to serving the American people through postal and other federal employment.

Congress and the president make decisions regarding how much money OPM gets each year. Unfortunately, it appears that those decisions are headed in the wrong direction. In February 2016, OPM requested \$321,254,000 in discretionary spending for FY 2017. In May 2017, OPM's FY 2018 budget request was reduced to \$309,000,000. That is a significant decrease, not an increase.

On a brighter note, there is an additional OPM customer service avenue. The OIG report highlights it as a more positive aspect of the overall customer service picture. It is known as Services Online and is a web platform that provides retirement services on demand. In FY 2015, more than half a million retirees accessed Services Online, conducting more than 5 million transactions.

Retirees can use the Services Online website to:

- change your mailing address and e-mail address;
- change your password;
- establish, change or stop a checking or savings allotment;
- establish, change or stop an allotment to an organization;
- print ID cards from the Services Online screen;
- request duplicate annuity booklets via U.S. Mail;
- request a duplicate Form 1099-R;
- start, change or stop federal and state income tax withholdings;
- start direct deposit of your payment or change the account or financial institution to which your payment is sent; and
- view a statement describing your annuity payment.

To access Services Online, go to servicesonline.opm.gov. You will need your "CSA" or "CSF" claim number and a password. If you don't have a password, send a message, including your claim number, to retire@opm.gov with "Password Request" in the subject line. OPM will send you a password.

The OIG report does note that only about 500,000 of the 2.6 million federal retirees actually use this avenue to access OPM customer service. It also notes that the average age of federal retirees is 72 and this age group generally is not technically savvy. And that, despite increasing use of Services Online, call volumes continue to rise.

Thus, the problem of poor OPM customer service cannot ultimately be resolved by technology. It must be solved by increasing the number of customer service representatives. The 27,000:1 OPM ratio compared with the 8,000:1 Social Security ratio makes that point.

The cited OPM OIG report and the two OPM budgets can be directly accessed online at the Retirement page on nalco.org.