

This Testimony is Embargoed Until Tuesday, May 8th at 10:00 AM



Testimony of

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on

The State of Social Security's Information Technology

to

**United States House of Representatives
Ways and Means Committee
Subcommittee on Social Security**

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Good afternoon, Chairman Johnson and Ranking Member Becerra. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about our experience measuring and analyzing citizen satisfaction with nine of the Social Security Administration's internet-based electronic services and websites.

My name is Larry Freed, and I am President and CEO of ForeSee, a company that measures the customer experience for organizations in the public and private sector. On our client list are more than 200 federal websites, including nine Social Security websites and applications. ForeSee has been working with the Social Security Administration ("SSA") for more than eight years, and I appreciate the opportunity to describe our assessment of how effectively the SSA is using its internet-based services, websites, and applications to meet citizen needs and expectations.

About ForeSee

I'd like to give you a little bit of background on ForeSee and what we do, and then I'd like to share our research on the SSA with you today.

ForeSee is a customer experience analytics firm that continuously measures customer satisfaction and delivers powerful insights on where to prioritize improvements for maximum impact. We have measured the satisfaction of citizens on a variety of SSA's web properties since 2004.

The way this works in practice is that we develop and launch scientific surveys that are presented to random visitors on SSA websites and applications. Visitors are randomly intercepted as they experience the website or application and given an opportunity to answer questions about their expectations and experience of the website.

ForeSee uses a patented technology based on a methodology developed at the University of Michigan called the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI). The ACSI methodology has a long history as a measurement system, performance metric, and improvement tool in the federal government. Based on several factors, the ACSI methodology was chosen by the federal government as a performance metric to measure citizen satisfaction in 1999, and has been used on the web since 2001 to help agencies and departments comply with the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) of 1993, the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010, the Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996, the E-Government Act of 2002, and Executive Orders 12862 and 13571.

The methodology allows us to take the raw data resulting from citizen surveys and turn it into actionable intelligence that shows the SSA and our other federal clients what elements need to be improved or enhanced in order to improve citizen satisfaction, online transparency, and usage of the online channel, which provides substantial cost savings for the Agency. We apply these surveys and methodology across all customer touchpoints, including websites, call centers, brick-and-mortar locations, mobile sites and

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apps, and social media interactions. Our work for the SSA to date has been focused on websites and online applications.

Since 2001, ForeSee has measured citizen satisfaction on more than 300 government websites across 50 departments and agencies, in addition to international, state, and quasi-government sites. ForeSee has also collected more than 7 million citizen surveys from visitors to federal government websites since 2001, including over 4 million since President Obama's inauguration in 2009.

Why Measure Satisfaction?

Before I share our specific research on citizen satisfaction with the SSA, I want to talk briefly about why so many federal agencies find it critical to measure and improve citizen satisfaction on their websites.

User satisfaction, as measured using the ForeSee methodology, is proven to have a direct impact on behavior. If federal government agencies focus on improving their websites' priority areas, citizen satisfaction with the sites should also improve.

Based on future behavior scores, citizens who are highly satisfied with a federal government website rate their trust in the agency 70% higher and report being 48% more likely to participate in government by expressing their thoughts to the agency than citizens who are less satisfied. These are future behaviors that relate directly to the Open Government Initiative.

Satisfaction also increases the likelihood that the citizen will return to the website again (52%), use it as a primary resource (92%) as opposed to utilizing more costly channels, or recommend the site to others (by 86%). These behaviors significantly increase efficiency and reduce costs.

Our research continues to demonstrate that citizens find their interactions with the government through the online channel to be far more satisfying than through traditional means (call center, in-person). It is often easier and more convenient to do so. While many citizens complain about their experiences in dealing with the government, that frustration has not often been true in the online realm. The SSA and other agencies must focus on the customer experience online in order to maximize the value of this cost-saving channel.

ForeSee's Work with the SSA

Next I'd like to share some of our research with you on how well the SSA is meeting citizen needs and expectations with the websites and applications we are currently measuring.

ForeSee has measured and analyzed customer satisfaction data for nine SSA websites and applications including the SSA main site, for more than eight years. SSA uses the data and analysis in three main ways:

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- 1) to measure whether the websites and applications are meeting and exceeding the needs of citizens
- 2) to understand how to improve websites in a citizen-centric manner
- 3) to understand how improving online self-service decreases offline service and therefore leads to decreased utilization of offline services and therefore increased efficiency and cost-savings.

One example is the FAQs section of the website. SSA calculated that having a successful FAQ website section with highly satisfied visitors reduced the number of high-cost contacts (through phone calls and office visits) by 480,000.

ForeSee is currently measuring and analyzing customer satisfaction on nine SSA websites:

- 1) Social Security Online (Main Website) -- socialsecurity.gov
- 2) Social Security Internet Disability Report -- ssa.gov/applyfordisability
- 3) SSA iClaim -- socialsecurity.gov/applyonline
- 4) Social Security Business Services Online -- ssa.gov/bsowelcome.htm
- 5) SSA Retirement Estimator -- ssa.gov/estimator
- 6) Help with Medicare Prescription Drug Plan Costs -- socialsecurity.gov/i1020
- 7) Social Security Online: Frequently Asked Questions -- ssa-custhelp.ssa.gov
- 8) SSA iAppeals -- <https://secure.ssa.gov/apps6z/iAppeals/ap001.jsp>
- 9) SSA Electronic Access -- <http://www.ssa.gov/mystatement/>

ForeSee measures satisfaction on a 100-point scale. Any score above 80 is generally considered excellent.

Scores for SSA's measured websites currently range from 69 to 92 on ForeSee's 100-point scale. Six of the nine SSA websites score above 80, generally considered the threshold for excellence on ForeSee's scale. In fact three SSA websites meet or exceed the performance of top private-sector websites.

Amazon, the highest-scoring e-retail website in history, in terms of customer satisfaction, has a published ACSI score of 89. SSA iClaim has a satisfaction score of 92, SSA Retirement Estimator has a 91, and Help with Medicare Prescription Drug Plan Costs has an 89, meaning three of SSA's nine measured websites outperform or tie Amazon.

I would like to share with you a brief report on the performance of the nine SSA websites that we measure, in descending order from highest to lowest-scoring site or application. Each of the scores I mention reflects data that was collected in the first four months of 2012.

- 1) We have been measuring satisfaction with SSA's iClaim (socialsecurity.gov/applyonline) since January of 2004; it is one of the two sites or applications we've been measuring for the longest time. iClaim's current satisfaction score is 92. iClaim is an example of an SSA site that has seen tremendous improvement. The site scored 68 when it was measured in 2004 and now scores 92 after a series of citizen driven improvements over the years. Once one of the lowest-scoring

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websites in our benchmark, it is now the highest.

- 2) SSA's Retirement Estimator (ssa.gov/estimator) has been tracking citizen satisfaction since July of 2008. Current satisfaction sits at 90, the second-highest-scoring website or application we're measuring for the SSA. Our research has shown that improved satisfaction reduces the likelihood that English-speaking constituents will apply for Social Security benefits in the field office, and it does have a positive impact on filing online as well as using other online SSA Applications. Both of these findings reinforce extensive research showing that improving satisfaction can be a cost-saving measure.
- 3) Help with Medicare Prescription Drug Plan Costs (socialsecurity.gov/i1020) began measuring satisfaction in June of 2005, and its satisfaction is currently 89, meaning citizens are just as satisfied with this application as they are with Amazon.com, the top-scoring private-sector website, which also scores an 89 in published ACSI studies. Highly satisfied visitors to this "Extra Help" application are more likely to use other online SSA applications, which should save costs.
- 4) SSA's Electronic Access Application (<http://www.ssa.gov/mystatement/>) just started measuring customer satisfaction on May 1 of 2012. Electronic Access presents a survey to anyone who registers for an electronic access account, and since the site receives so much traffic, sufficient surveys were collected on the very first day of measurement (more than 1000 completed surveys in the first day) to calculate a statistically reliable score of 88, well above 80, the generally-recognized threshold for excellence.
- 5) The Internet Disability Report (ssa.gov/applyfordisability) has been measuring satisfaction with ForeSee since July of 2006 and currently has a score of 83. Satisfaction with this application has increased from 72 to 83 since 2006, placing it well above the threshold for excellence (80). Site changes were implemented in January, 2010 resulting in shorter application completion times and higher satisfaction.
- 6) Scores for Business Services Online (ssa.gov/bso/bsowelcome.htm) have been consistently above 80 since it was first measured in February of 2005. BSO's current satisfaction score is 83.
- 7) With a satisfaction score of 71, SSA's iAppeals (ssa.gov/appeals/) is one of the lower-scoring applications since it was first measured in February of 2011. A great deal of attention has therefore been paid to improving the customer experience. Changes were made to the forms in December 2011, and again in February 2012. SSA is currently using customer experience analytics from ForeSee to drive additional changes planned for August 2012.
- 8) Surveys have shown that some visitors are expecting the FAQ section of the SSA website (ssa-custhelp.ssa.gov) to answer personal questions (which it cannot) and that the FAQ needs better

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organization and structure to help visitors more efficiently find answers to their questions. Therefore, the FAQ section is one of the lower-scoring SSA websites with a score of 70. As a result of survey data and analysis, SSA is currently working on a redesign of this resource to better aid site visitors. This site has been measuring citizen satisfaction since June of 2004.

- 9) The SSA's main website (www.socialsecurity.gov) is the lowest-scoring of all of SSA's measured web properties with a score of 69, perhaps because its broader mission makes expectations harder to meet and exceed. Since we have been measuring the main website since January of 2004, we have noticed that Satisfaction scores tend to drop every November through February as visitors coming to fill out their W-2/W-3 struggle to find the location.

I would like to share some points of comparison with you in order to put these scores in context. SSA websites and applications can measure against themselves over time, against other SSA websites and applications, and they can also measure against other federal websites.

About the ACSI E-Government Satisfaction Index

The ACSI E-Government Satisfaction Index is a special quarterly report that ForeSee produces in partnership with the American Customer Satisfaction Index. It includes satisfaction scores on a 100-point scale for more than 100 federal websites who choose to be included in the publicly-released Index. The average satisfaction for all the federal websites included in the Index is 75.2 on the Index's 100-point scale.

Six of the nine SSA websites outperform this ACSI E-Government Satisfaction Index average of 75.2.

In addition, ForeSee is able to calculate satisfaction averages for departments and agencies with more than 5 measured websites. Of the eight federal agencies that qualify for an average, SSA has by far the highest average satisfaction in our most recent report:

- Social Security Administration: average citizen satisfaction of 82.2
- Department of Homeland Security: average citizen satisfaction of 78.7
- Department of Health and Human Services: average citizen satisfaction of 78.4
- Department of State: average citizen satisfaction of 76.4
- Department of Defense: average citizen satisfaction of 75.1
- Department of Transportation: average citizen satisfaction of 69.1
- Department of Agriculture: average citizen satisfaction of 68.4
- Department of the Treasury: average citizen satisfaction of 64.6

SSA also has the three highest-scoring websites in the entire ACSI E-Government Satisfaction Index: SSA iClaim (92), SSA Retirement Estimator (91), and Help with Medicare Prescription Drug Plan Costs (89).

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Another interesting way to set the SSA's scores in context is to compare online scores to other measures of citizen satisfaction with government information and services. Once a year, the ACSI measures citizen satisfaction with government agencies overall. In January 2012, the ACSI reported a score of 69 for the Social Security Administration overall. This is a measure of citizen satisfaction with the agency as a whole. Clearly online satisfaction is vastly outperforming offline satisfaction since the SSA's average online score is an 82.2. Higher online satisfaction is positive reinforcement of the value of SSA's websites and online applications.

The ACSI reports that satisfaction with the federal government overall was 66.9 as of January 2012. Therefore, the SSA is outperforming federal averages both online and offline.

Online Transparency

In conjunction with the ACSI E-Government Satisfaction Index, ForeSee produces an Online Transparency Index. This was started as a tangible way to measure transparency in accordance with Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government, issued by the White House in January of 2009.

The Online Transparency Index serves as a consistent measure of online transparency and quantifies its impact on citizens' attitudes and behaviors, as mediated by satisfaction. The Index has grown into a vital tool for measuring the success, failure, or progress of government departments and agencies online, providing a clear direction for improvement.

Research has defined the link between online transparency, satisfaction, future behaviors, and attitudes like trust, giving government agencies the tools they require to measure their success in meeting the open government directives, allowing them to identify where and how to improve citizens' views of transparency and drive citizen satisfaction higher. Improved citizen satisfaction is a key result. It is also a critical component in judging whether or not a website should be consolidated or eliminated—satisfaction speaks directly to users' needs being met.

Not all agencies and departments are currently measuring online transparency as part of their ForeSee models. A total of 40 sites are reported in the Online Transparency Index as a component of their participation in the ForeSee e-government report.

The aggregate Q1 2012 online transparency score for the 40 measured federal sites is 76.8 on the study's 100-point scale. Only one of nine SSA websites and applications is currently measuring and reporting online transparency as part of ForeSee's Online Transparency Index. The Online Transparency score for the SSA's main website is 73, which is slightly below average. Improvements to online transparency could be a beneficial for the SSA and most federal websites and applications.

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Mobile, the Future of E-Government and the SSA

According to Forrester Research, 91.4 million people in the U.S. own smart phones. Comscore reports that in 2011, 14.6 of all on online sessions were initiated from a mobile device (nearly triple the rate of 5.6% in 2010).

Meanwhile, there are over 2000 top-level federal.gov domains, but GSA's online app store offers roughly 100 federal apps, according to WhiteHouse.gov, indicating a large gap between traditional web development and mobile development.

In an informal poll of our clients, we found that two-thirds of our federal websites do not have a corresponding mobile site or app. Of the sites we polled, 32% have launched a mobile site or app, 53% are currently planning or developing one, and 15% have yet to take the first steps in creating a mobile app or mobile-optimized website.

More and more federal agencies understand the importance of driving improvements and enhancements based on the way citizens experience those websites. As citizens increasingly access online information through smart phones and tablets, it will be crucial for all federal agencies, including the SSA, to measure and understand the citizen experience across all touch points, including mobile-optimized websites, mobile apps and conventional websites, as well as more traditional modes of interacting with the government, such as contact centers and branch offices.

Conclusion

SSA websites that are successfully meeting their users' needs should be proud of their achievements, while simultaneously looking for new ways to improve. The benefits of providing a high quality web site for SSA's customers are lower costs, more convenience for its customers, and a more satisfying experience, all of which lead to greater trust in the agency.

Unlike the corporate sector, government agencies need to maintain the highest online standards not because their bottom line is at stake, but because they have an obligation and a responsibility to the citizenry that enables them. Democracy depends on citizens' ability to get information and services from a variety of channels.

SSA websites that are lower scoring should continue to focus on citizen-centric improvements to the online experience. Expansions should be made to understand the citizen experience across all SSA websites, mobile sites, and mobile apps.

SSA web managers have demonstrated commendable dedication to improving the online customer experience, which in turn makes citizens more likely to use the website, which is a more cost-effective channel. It is remarkable that three SSA websites outperform Amazon.com.

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Thank you for the opportunity to share our experience with the citizen experience provided by the SSA online.