FYs 2020–2021 Agency Priority Goal Action Plan

Improve the National 800 Number Service

Goal Leaders:

Goal Leader: Erik Jones, Assistant Deputy Commissioner, Office of Operations

Deputy Goal Leader: Jim Borland, Assistant Deputy Commissioner, Office of Systems

Overview

Goal Statement and Targets

Improve the customer experience by reducing the Average Speed of Answer on the National 800 Number. [1]

- By September 30, 2020, achieve an average speed of answer of 17 minutes.
- By September 30, 2021, achieve an average speed of answer of 11 minutes.

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[1] This target is also a budgeted workload measure (BWM) and as such are estimates. BWM estimates are updated each year with the President's Budget.   The FY 2021 target will be finalized with the FY 2021 enacted appropriation.

Overview

Challenge

Customers who call Social Security's National 800 Number service often experience lengthy wait times to speak to an agent. These wait times are attributed to several factors, including a decline in agent staffing due to attrition, and limited replacement hiring. For example, the agency dropped from a high of 4,857 on-duty National 800 Number staff in fiscal year (FY) 2011 to only 4,235 on-duty staff at the start of FY 2019. Additional factors contributing to long wait times include training issues and limited self-service options available to the public.

Opportunities

We have several efforts underway to address our challenges. We plan to:

- Hire new agents to address attrition and maintain an appropriate level of staffing;
- Streamline training to allow agents to be productive faster;
- Enhance current self-service options so callers do not have to wait to speak with an agent; and
- Provide a more modernized unified communications platform (UCP) that will improve service to our National 800 Number callers.

Leadership and Implementation Team

Office of Operations
APG Leadership and Implementation Teams

Leadership Team

> **Erik Jones**, *Assistant Deputy Commissioner (Office of Operations)*
> Goal Leader

> **Jim Borland**, *Assistant Deputy Commissioner (Office of Systems)*
> Deputy Goal Leader

Implementation Team

> *Associate Commissioner (Office of Operations)*
> Office of Customer Service

> *Associate Commissioner (Office of Systems)*
> Office of Hardware Engineering

> *Division Director (Office of Operations)*
> Office of Customer Service, Division for Contact Center Services

> *Regional Commissioners (Office of Operations)*
> Regional Offices (excluding Boston and Denver)

Goal Structure and Strategies

The National 800 Number APG supports the following strategic goal and objective defined in our FYs 2018–2022 Agency Strategic Plan.

- Strategic Goal 1: Deliver Services Effectively
- Strategic Objective 1.1: Improve Service Delivery

By focusing on increasing staffing and improving our technology and training, we will:

- Answer calls faster;
- Answer more calls before a customer encounters an agent busy call back message; and
- Increase the number of self-service options.

Key indicators of success in our goal progress include:

- Reduction in Average Speed of Answer: The Average Speed of Answer is the average amount of time callers wait in queue to be answered by an agent. Wait time begins when the call is placed in queue and ends when the agent answers.
- Reduction in Agent Busy Rate: The Agent Busy Rate is the percentage of calls routed for live agent service that encounter a busy call back message.
- Increase in Calls Handled: The total number of calls handled by agents and automation on the National 800 Number.

Goal Structure and Strategies

Implementation Strategies:

- Increasing Agent Staffing: In addition to replacing losses due to attrition, we plan to hire an additional 1,000 agents in FY 2020 to address the shortfall.

- Incorporating New Training Model: We will streamline training into two phases to enable new hires to become more productive in a shorter amount of time.

- Implementing Technology Improvements: We will launch self-service applications, enabling callers to complete additional actions without an agent.

- Monitoring Call Trends: We will continue to monitor call trends relating to fraudulent Social Security schemes to ensure our public education campaign reduces scam-related call volumes.

Summary of Progress – FY 2020 Q1 and Q2

Overall APG Progress

We exceeded our first quarter milestone of on-boarding 400 newly hired agents by on-boarding 460 agents. We also updated our fraud message to direct callers to the Office of the Inspector General's website to report scams. As of the end of the second quarter, our Average Speed of Answer (ASA) was 15.5 minutes.[2] By comparison, through the second quarter of FY 2019, our ASA was about 29 minutes. We achieved an Agent Busy Rate (ABR) of 11.9 percent and handled over 18.5 million calls.

In March 2020 we had to close our physical telephone service centers and move to a virtual environment for the National 800 Number Network (N8NN) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This shift negatively impacted our ASA and ABR performance in March. To help mitigate service impacts we reinstated use of telework equipment for approximately 1,200 agents. Additionally, our Office of Systems developed a routing platform that allows agents to work remotely without additional equipment. Thanks to the quick work of our Office of Systems, in approximately one month, we delivered a software solution that increased the number of telework enabled agents from 25 percent to nearly 100 percent. This solution allows us to transfer calls from the main N8NN system to agents working remotely to handle service calls from the public.

To further assist in managing service, we changed the operating hours of the N8NN to 8:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. local time for the duration of the pandemic and stay-at-home orders. We also delayed hiring for the N8NN because of the ongoing pandemic.[3]

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[2] FY 2020 results are through March 31, 2020, which is the end of the calendar month.
[3] Effective March 17, we took steps to protect the public and our employees from COVID-19. At this time, we are still assessing how the COVID-19 pandemic will impact our workload performance ([and hiring] where appropriate).
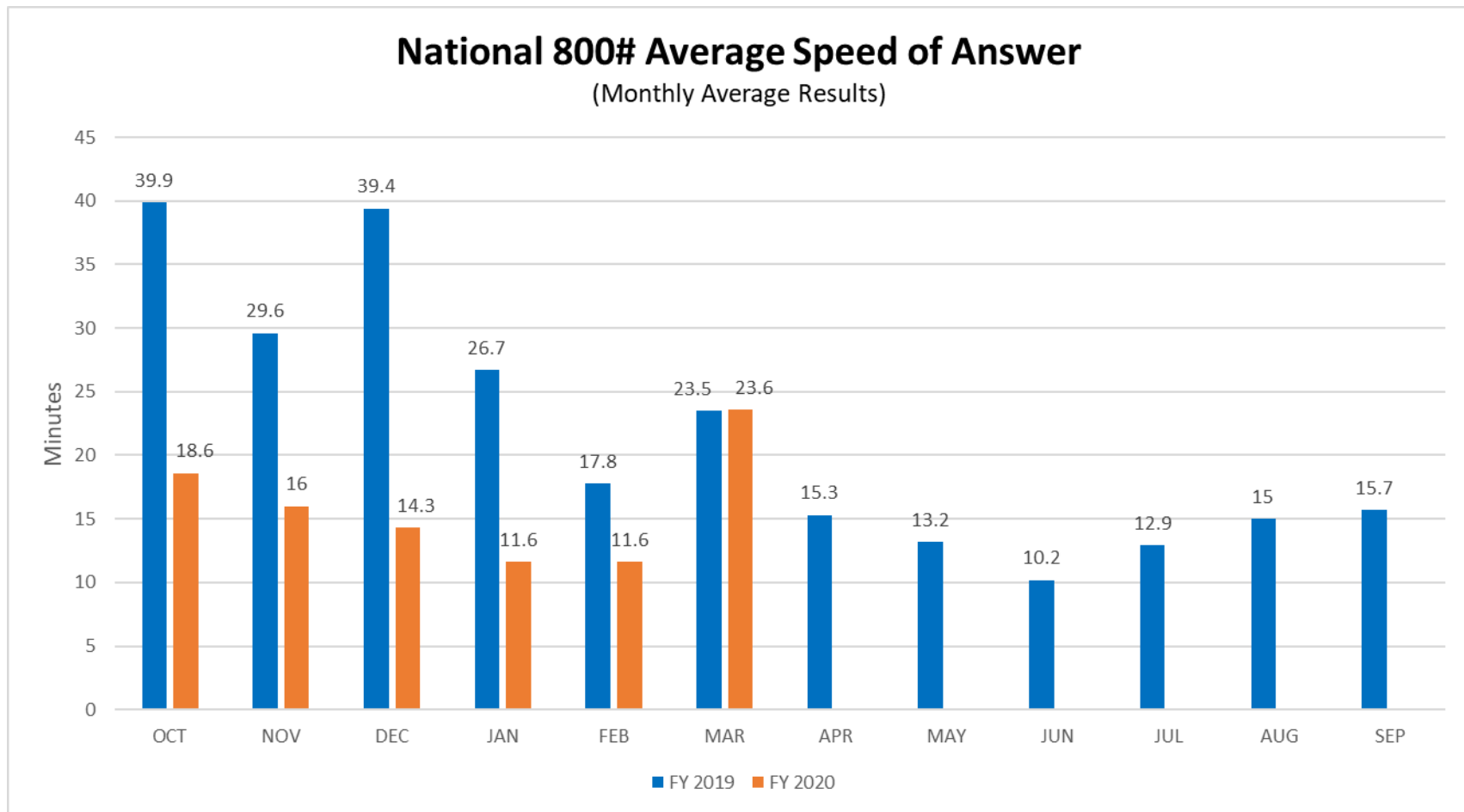
Key Milestones

We have identified quarterly milestones to assess our progress toward completing the National 800 Number goal.

Milestone Summary		
Key Milestones	**Milestone Due Date**	**Milestone Status**
FY 2020		
On-board 400 newly hired National 800 Number agents	Q1	Complete
Release new 800 Number and OIG fraud hotline message to inform the public of Social Security impersonation scams	Q1	Complete
Enable simplified authentication for Interactive Voice Response (IVR) for Claims Status callers	Q2	Complete
Complete initial training for 400 newly hired National 800 Number agents	Q2	Complete
On-board 500 newly hired National 800 number agents	Q3	Not On-Track
Complete initial training for 500 newly hired National 800 number agents	Q4	
Award new contract for a modernized UCP	Q4	
FY 2021		
Establish core IT infrastructure for the modernized UCP	Q1	
Implement three new IVR improvements	Q2	
Complete employee training on the modernized UCP	Q3	
Evaluate the implementation of the UCP and update strategies for continuing to improve 800 number services	Q4	

Key Indicators

Primary Indicator: Average Speed of Answer

- FY 2020 Target: 17 minutes
- FYTD 2020 Results: 15.5 minutes

National 800# Average Speed of Answer
(Monthly Average Results)

Month	FY 2019	FY 2020
OCT	39.9	18.6
NOV	29.6	16
DEC	39.4	14.3
JAN	26.7	11.6
FEB	17.8	11.6
MAR	23.5	23.6
APR	15.3	
MAY	13.2	
JUN	10.2	
JUL	12.9	
AUG	15	
SEP	15.7	

Key Indicators

Historical Data

Reduction in Average Speed of Answer[4]:

- FY 2020 Target: We plan to reduce our average speed of answer to 17 minutes.
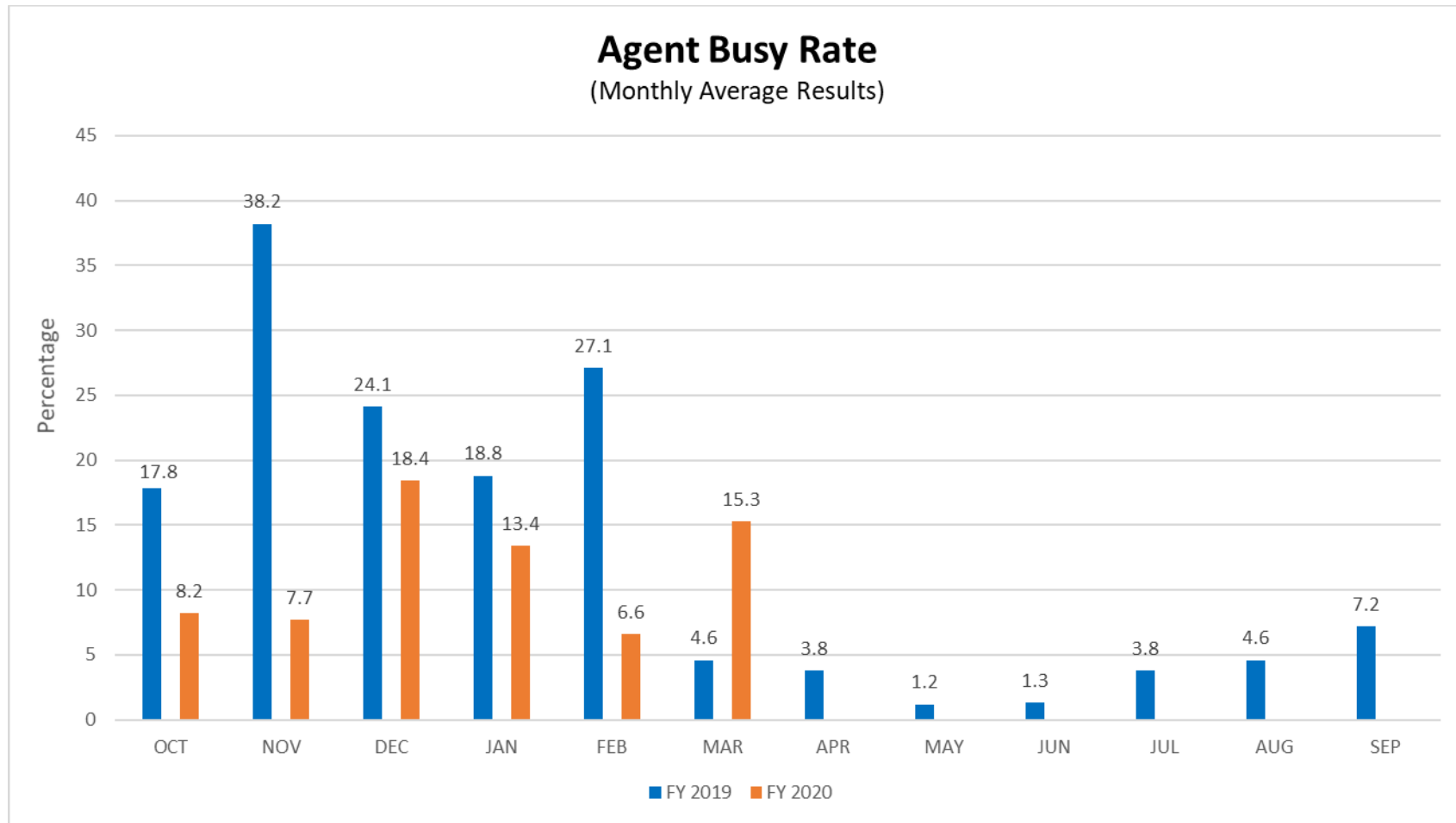- FY 2021 Target: We plan to reduce our average speed of answer to 11 minutes.

Beginning of Year on Duty Staff vs. Average Speed of Answer

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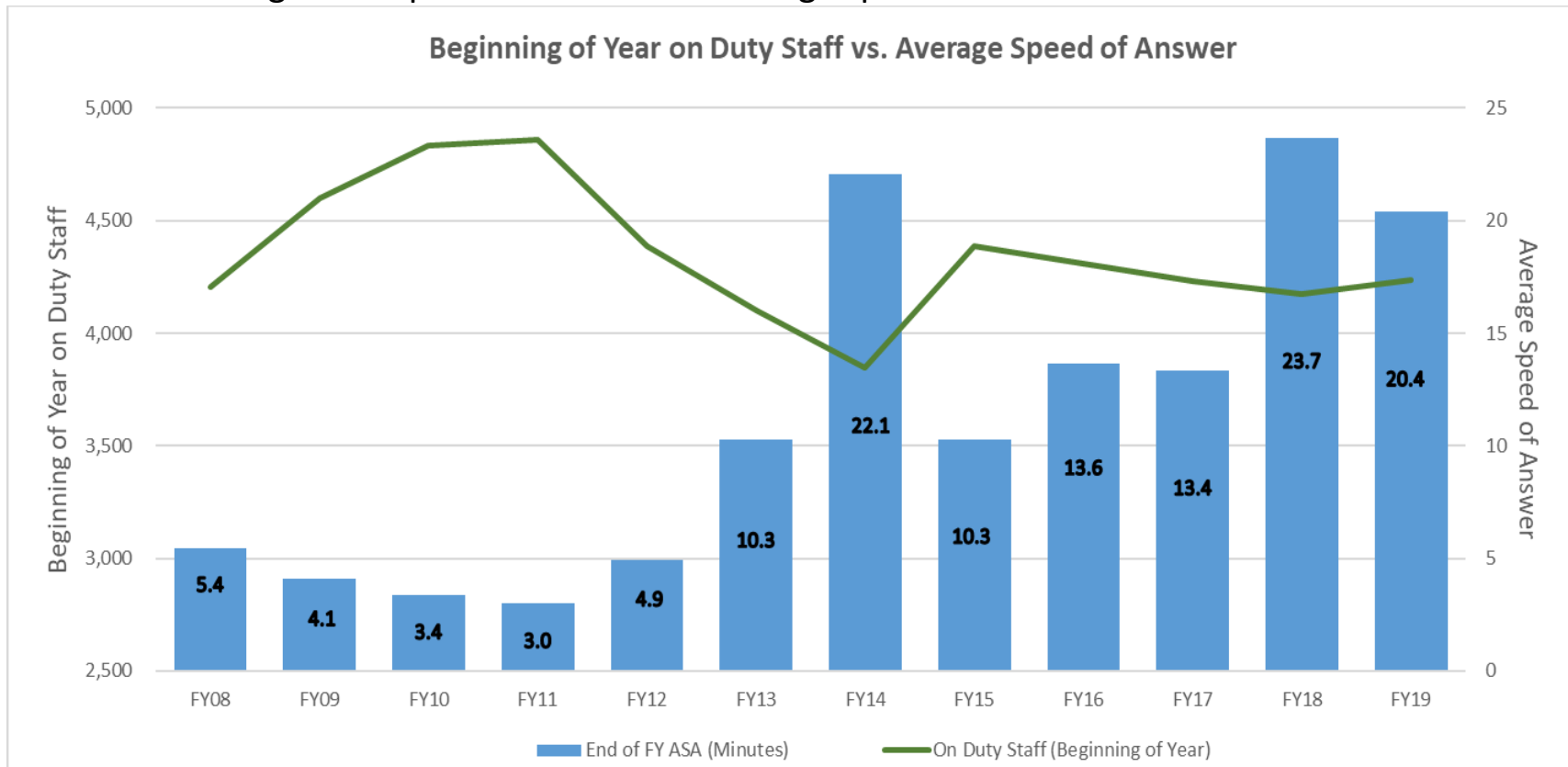
[4] This target is also a BWM and as such are estimates. BWM estimates are updated each year with the President's Budget. The FY 2021 target will be finalized with the FY 2021 enacted appropriation.

Key Indicators

Secondary Indicator: Agent Busy Rate

- FY 2020 Target: 12 percent
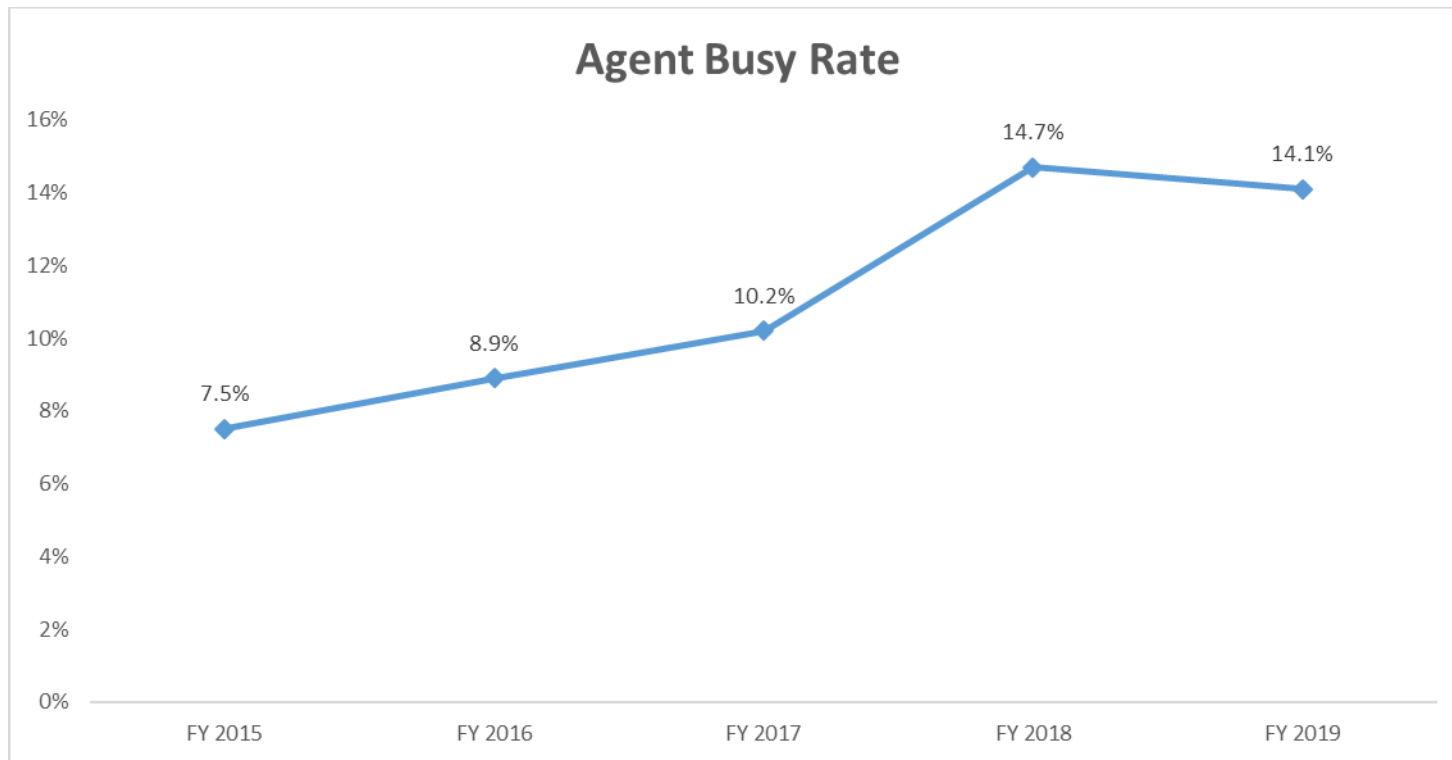- FYTD 2020 Results: 11.9 percent

Key Indicators

Historical Data

Reduction in Agent Busy Rate[5]:

- FY 2020 Target: We plan to reduce our agent busy rate to 12 percent.
- FY 2021 Target: We plan to reduce our agent busy rate to 7 percent.
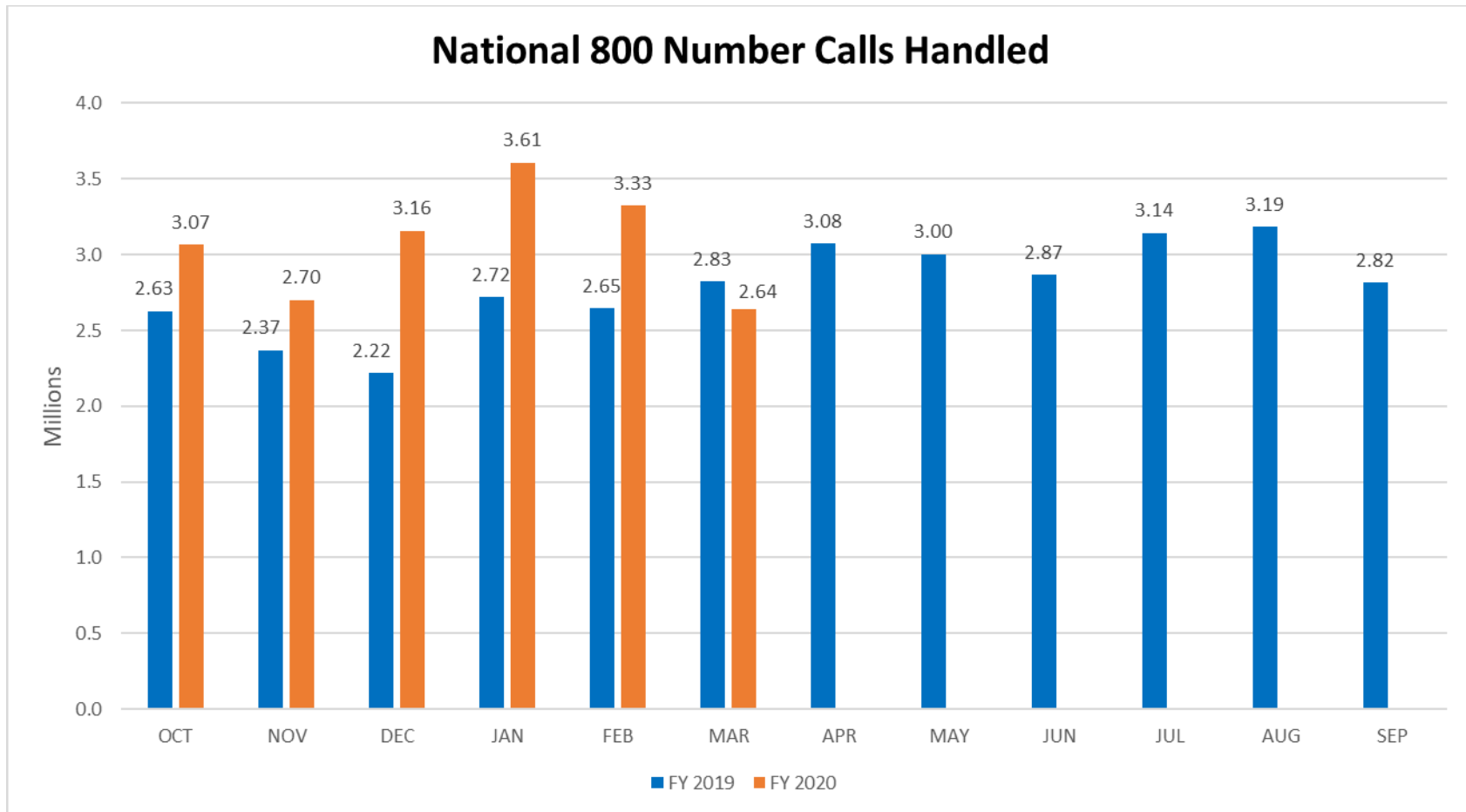

Agent Busy Rate

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[5] This target is also a BWM and as such are estimates. BWM estimates are updated each year with the President's Budget. The FY 2021 target will be finalized with the FY 2021 enacted appropriation.

Key Indicators

Secondary Indicator: Calls Handled

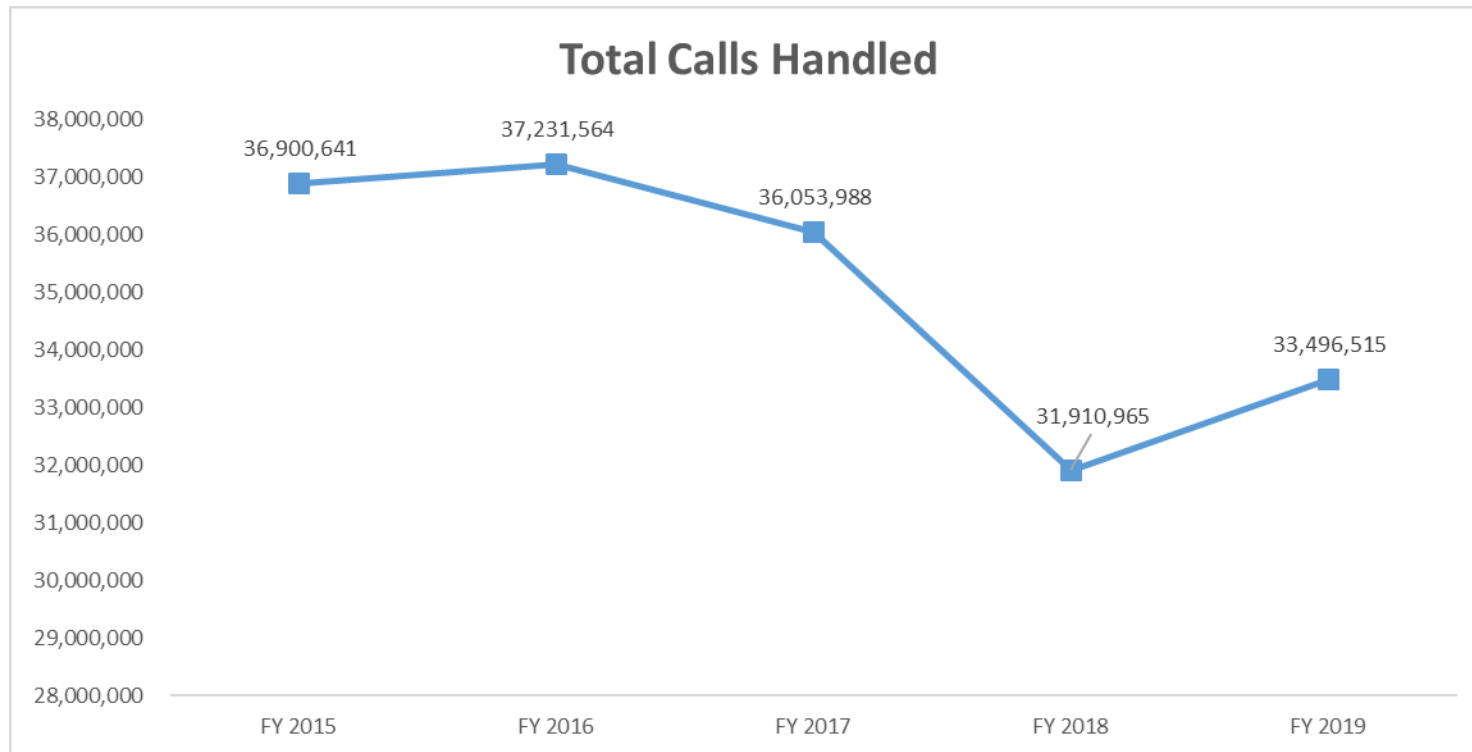- FY 2020 Target: 36 million
- FYTD 2020 Results: 18,502,164

National 800 Number Calls Handled

Key Indicators

Historical Data

Increase in Calls Handled[6]:

- FY 2020 Target: We plan to increase our total calls handled to 36 million.
- FY 2021 Target: We plan to increase our total calls handled to 41 million.

Total Calls Handled

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[6] This target is also a BWM and as such are estimates. BWM estimates are updated each year with the President's Budget. The FY 2021 target will be finalized with the FY 2021 enacted appropriation.

Assumptions and Risks

We have identified the following assumptions for accomplishing the goal. We have also identified the following risks that could affect our progress along with mitigation plans to address these risks.

Assumptions
Availability of qualified candidates
Normal levels of agent attrition
Stable call volumes
Adequate resources for hiring and technology modernization

Key Risks	Mitigation
Failure to resolve authentication challenges to enable IVR	We developed a Digital Identity Strategy to advance our agency's plan to improve the existing Digital Identity system, develop authentication for IVR telephone services, and enter into partnerships with trusted third parties (Identity Federation).
High turnover/attrition/inadequate candidate pool	With sufficient budgetary resources, we can replace our agent losses with qualified candidates.
Delay in awarding the new UCP contract	We continue to explore updating and deploying IVR applications on the existing communications platform as we await the awarding of the new UCP contract.
Increase in spoofing	We will continue to support efforts to identify scammers misusing our telephone services and take necessary appropriate actions.

Data Accuracy and Reliability

Our National 800 Number service data comes from AT&T through their Automated Call Distribution tool. There are no known data or system limitations.

During the initial contract award, we tested and confirmed the data accuracy from the vendor. As a result, we used the validated data to create SSA's *Operational Data Store* (ODS). We use the ODS to create standard reports to monitor our performance on the following key indicators: The Average Speed of Answer, Agent Busy Rate, and Call Volumes.

We created the *Daily Telephone Service Performance Dashboard* to monitor our service performance for these key indicator metrics.

Additional Information

Internal Stakeholders

Employees: Our National 800 Number Network Agents are dedicated public servants committed to providing accurate and timely service to the public.

Office of Human Resources (OHR): We work with the OHR to hire new employees, and develop and deliver training.

Office of Acquisitions and Grants (OAG): We collaborate with OAG to address acquisition planning and procurement needs, including purchasing major IT services and products to support the agency's communication platforms.

Office of the Inspector General (OIG): We collaborate with OIG to address spoofing and fraudulent Social Security schemes targeting our callers.

Additional Information

External Stakeholders

Congress: Congress maintains an interest in service delivery options for the public – the National 800 Number, face-to-face, and online services.

The Public: The public expects to have a positive customer experience when calling the National 800 Number. Existing customer feedback surveys continue to show that wait time is one of the biggest drivers of customer satisfaction.

Labor Union Organization: The American Federation of Government Employees represents our National 800 Number agents and provides input to leadership within the Office of Operations.

Advocacy Groups: These organizations advocate for the rights of people with disabilities, including advocating for secure and convenient service delivery options, such as improved National 800 Number services.