Request for Review Workloads at the Appeals Council
A-12-13-13039

SOCIAL SECURITY
ADMINISTRATION
OIG

Objective

To assess steps the Appeals Council (AC) had taken to reduce its pending *request for review* workloads and related processing times.

Background

The AC, within the Office of Appellate Operations (OAO), is the final level of administrative review for claims filed under Titles II and XVI of the *Social Security Act*. The AC's role is to review administrative law judge (ALJ) decisions and orders of dismissal, either at the claimant's request or on its own volition. When the AC conducts a review, it may render the Commissioner's final decision, issue an order of dismissal, or remand the case to an ALJ for further proceedings.

Both administrative appeals judges (AAJ) and appeals officers (AO) issue actions on cases. AAJs issue favorable, partially favorable, unfavorable, denial, dismissal, or remand order actions while AOs only issue denials. Before an adjudicator decides the case, an analyst reviews the claimant's file and provides a recommendation to the adjudicator.

Our Findings

Since Fiscal Year (FY) 2007, the AC has struggled to keep up with the increasing number of *request for review* cases it has received. As a result, by FY 2013, the AC's case backlog had tripled, and related processing times were about 60 percent higher than FY 2007. Throughout this period, the AC continued increasing dispositions and productivity through hiring, improved training, and analyst performance goals. Moreover, the AC's focus on the oldest cases benefited claimants waiting the longest for their cases to be decided.

Our review identified steps the AC could take to further increase productivity. For instance, the lack of productivity goals and caps for AAJs or AOs processing *requests for review* cases, particularly given the wide range in the number of dispositions each AAJ and AO issued, increases the risk that AC managers may miss opportunities to increase production as well as identify potential quality issues. In addition, while the AC has established division-level productivity goals, some managers and staff were uncertain how these goals are established. Moreover, the Agency reduced the number of performance goals shared with the public. Finally, although the AC established quality control initiatives covering AC workloads, some of these initiatives were limited in duration or review results were undocumented. We also found the quality review lacked a monitoring system to identify trends and collectively they did not cover all parts of the AC workload.

Our Recommendations

We made a number of recommendations to (1) improve published performance goals, (2) establish adjudicator productivity goals, (3) enhance communication of internal goals, (4) formalize successful quality reviews, and (5) explore additional methods for conducting quality reviews of all relevant workloads.

The Agency agreed with all of our recommendations.