

# Characteristics of Claimants in the Social Security Administration's Pending Hearings Backlog

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Office of Audit Report Summary

### Background

We are issuing this report to provide information on the volume and age of pending hearing cases, the characteristics of the claimants awaiting a decision, and the status of pending cases.

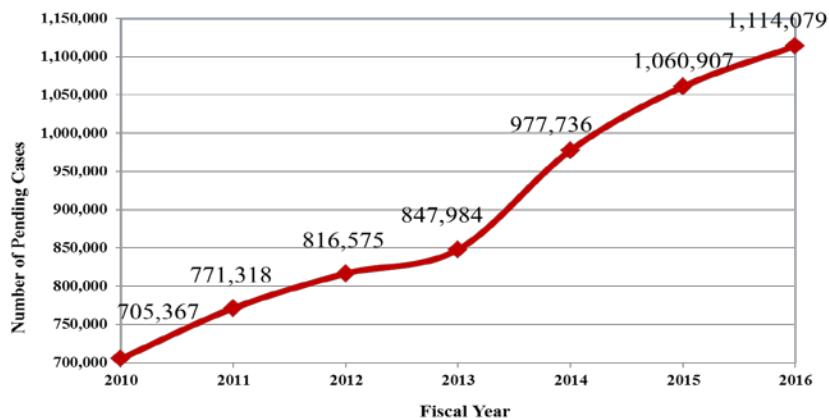
The Office of Disability Adjudication and Review (ODAR) administers the Social Security Administration's (SSA) hearings and appeals program. Individuals who are dissatisfied with the Agency's reconsideration decision (or, after the initial decision, in those States where there is no reconsideration step) have the right to request a hearing.

SSA's pending hearings workload has increased 58 percent since Fiscal Year (FY) 2010. As of March 2016, about 1.1 million claimants were awaiting a hearing decision, and the average processing time for a claim was about 518 days.

In January 2016, SSA developed the *Compassionate And REsponsive Service* (CARES) plan to address this backlog and reduce average processing time to 270 days by 2020. The CARES plan calls for additional administrative law judges (ALJ) to be hired and contains numerous initiatives to address ODAR workloads.

### Summary

As of March 2016, ODAR had about 1.1 million pending claims awaiting a hearing decision with the average age of 318 days, measured as the time from the date of the hearing request. The volume and age of pending hearing cases has increased since FY 2010.



With respect to the claims awaiting a decision, we found

- claimants' average age was 45, and about 6 percent of pending claims involved claimants under age 19;
- about 45 percent of hearing requests nationwide awaited assignment for pre-hearing preparation; and
- approximately 7,400 claimants were deceased.

We found wide variations in workloads by hearing office nationwide. For instance, the average pending cases per ALJ ranged from 502 in the Boston Region to 972 in the New York Region. We also found that the proportion of individuals awaiting a decision in Georgia as related to the number of disability beneficiaries in the State was three times higher than that in Massachusetts.

ODAR continues focusing its efforts on processing the oldest cases in the pending backlog first with limited exceptions for cases that require special processing, such as critical cases and remands. ODAR has established a variety of initiatives to increase available resources and place them where they are most needed.