

Summary of The Social Security Administration's Disability Research Consortium

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Objective

To answer specific questions from the Subcommittee on Social Security regarding the Social Security Administration's (SSA) Disability Research Consortium (DRC) grants.

Background

The DRC is designed to establish a disability research program that meets SSA's growing need for research-based information on matters related to program and public policy. The DRC comprises the Mathematica Policy Research's (MPR) Center for Studying Disability Policy and the National Bureau of Economic Research's (NBER) Disability Research Center.

On July 30, 2012, SSA awarded these Centers 5-year cooperative agreements.

On September 4, 2012, we received a request from the Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Social Security, to answer specific questions regarding the DRC grants.

Our Findings

SSA awarded the MPR and NBER Centers 5-year cooperative agreements running from August 1, 2012 through July 31, 2017. For Fiscal Year 2013, SSA provided MPR \$2.2 million and NBER \$2.8 million. Funding in subsequent years depends on future appropriations and budgetary approval.

For Fiscal Year 2013, each Center will work on a series of projects. The deliverables will include such things as project reports and policy abstracts. For each of the remaining grant years, SSA will select new projects from the DRC Centers. SSA and the Centers for the Research Retirement Consortium perform functions related to retirement policy. However, the other organizations and grantees in our review do not do this since each grant is intended for one project.

To select the Centers for the DRC, SSA used an external panel. SSA selected the panel members based on their experience with Federal programs for the disabled or knowledge of such programs and the public policy issues associated with them. Once selected, the Agency instructed the panel members to independently score the applications using a number of criteria and recommend centers based on these scores, the feasibility and adequacy of the project plans and methodologies, and how the centers jointly met the DRC's objectives. Once this was done, SSA convened and chaired a meeting for panel members to discuss the applications and finalize their scores. Following the meeting, an SSA staff member sent the panel's recommendations to the approving official. The approving official followed the panel's recommendations after considering them and other factors. To ensure the integrity of the selection process, SSA had the panel members sign a *Representation of Absence of Conflict of Interest* statement and a grants management officer monitored the process.