OFFICE OF
THE INSPECTOR GENERAL

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

**TRAINING AT OFFICES THAT MAKE
DISABILITY DETERMINATIONS**

March 2012   **A-01-11-21169**

AUDIT REPORT

Mission

By conducting independent and objective audits, evaluations and investigations, we inspire public confidence in the integrity and security of SSA's programs and operations and protect them against fraud, waste and abuse. We provide timely, useful and reliable information and advice to Administration officials, Congress and the public.

Authority

The Inspector General Act created independent audit and investigative units, called the Office of Inspector General (OIG). The mission of the OIG, as spelled out in the Act, is to:

- Conduct and supervise independent and objective audits and investigations relating to agency programs and operations.
- Promote economy, effectiveness, and efficiency within the agency.
- Prevent and detect fraud, waste, and abuse in agency programs and operations.
- Review and make recommendations regarding existing and proposed legislation and regulations relating to agency programs and operations.
- Keep the agency head and the Congress fully and currently informed of problems in agency programs and operations.

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- Independence to determine what reviews to perform.
- Access to all information necessary for the reviews.
- Authority to publish findings and recommendations based on the reviews.

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SOCIAL SECURITY

MEMORANDUM

Date: March 14, 2012   Refer To:

To: The Commissioner

From: Inspector General

Subject: Training at Offices that Make Disability Determinations (A-01-11-21169)

OBJECTIVE

Our objective was to determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) provided adequate training resources to offices that made disability determinations.

BACKGROUND

Training resources are critical to ensure SSA and disability determination services (DDS)[1] employees

- possess the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to make disability determinations;

- efficiently find the information needed to make disability determinations and maintain SSA's high quality of service to the public;

- remain current with SSA's technical, system, and policy updates related to making disability determinations; and

- support succession planning through professional enhancement and development.

As of September 2011, offices that made disability determinations employed 17,969 staff and made over 4 million disability determinations in Fiscal Year 2011. (See Appendix B for staffing details.)

These offices consist of State DDSs and SSA Federal units. Federal units are located in each of SSA's 10 regions plus 3 offices at SSA Headquarters—the Offices of Disability Operations, International Operations, and Medical and Vocational Expertise.

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[1] DDSs are State-run agencies that make disability determinations for SSA. DDS staff obtains relevant medical evidence, evaluates the case, and determines whether the claimant is disabled under SSA's criteria. DDSs are in each of the 50 States plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. The *Social Security Act* §§ 221(a)(2) and 1633(a), 42 U.S.C. §§ 421(a)(2) and 1383b(a). *See also* 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1603 and 416.1003.

The State DDS ensures that all its employees have an acceptable level of competence. SSA will generally not conduct or identify specific training for the DDSs because they consist of State—not Federal—employees;[2] however, SSA will reimburse the DDSs for all allowable expenditures, including training.[3] SSA will only step in if

- a State DDS' performance approaches unacceptable levels or
- the training material required is complex or the State DDS' capacity to deliver the training is in doubt and training uniformity is essential.[4]

For this review, we contacted 65 offices—all 52 DDSs and 13 Federal units—that make disability determinations. We also obtained feedback from SSA's

- Office of Disability Determinations (ODD) that supports and coordinates training;
- Office of Disability Programs (ODP) that administers policy and provides policy compliant training materials;
- Office of Learning (OL) that manages all disability training materials; and
- Centers for Disability that provide program leadership and technical direction and are located in each of SSA's 10 regions.

See Appendix C for our scope and methodology.

RESULTS OF REVIEW

SSA provided training resources to offices that made disability determinations; however, we found that offices required additional support. While the offices were generally satisfied with SSA's training resources, they supplemented these resources by creating their own. Moreover, several offices created materials for the same training topics. Thus, SSA was funding these duplicative efforts. Additionally, offices indicated that training materials should replicate the production environment.

Of the 65 offices we contacted, 64 (98 percent) responded. We provided SSA the information obtained from these offices. Our intent was to ensure SSA received <u>all</u> feedback to improve training resources, including items not discussed in this report.[5]

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[2] SSA does specify some training, such as security policies and procedures.

[3] The *Social Security Act* §§ 221(e) and 1633(a), 42 U.S.C. §§ 421(e) and 1383b(a). *See also* 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1626 and 416.1026.

[4] 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1622 and 416.1022. *See also* SSA, POMS, DI 39521.100 (March 21, 2002).

[5] Before transmittal, we omitted any information that would identify a specific office or location.

SSA'S TRAINING RESOURCES

SSA provides training resources and other instructional materials to facilitate basic and advanced technical skills of disability staff.[6] Resources include training programs, handbooks, Internet materials, Interactive Video Teletraining (IVT), and Video On Demand (VOD).

Training Programs and Handbooks

Disability Examiner Basic Training Program (DEBTP) comprises manuals and videos to train newly appointed disability examiners. The program content includes SSA's disability policy, medical and vocational topics, and case adjudication techniques.

Medical/Psychological Consultant Handbook provides new medical and psychological staff members or contractors a comprehensive overview of SSA's disability program and their roles in the adjudication process. The *Handbook* reflects current procedures and promotes consistency of policy application.

Intranet Materials

SSA National Learning Management System is an e-Learning site with over 3,000 online learning courses. Staff can access the site from work or home to take courses, including leadership skills, ethics, and office policies.

Online Disability Case Studies supplement training of new adjudicators. SSA designed the cases to encourage new adjudicators to think like experienced adjudicators and focus on effective case analysis and efficient development practices. This results in the adjudicator making the correct decision at the earliest point possible. As of December 2011, 50 training cases with over 120 different policy issues and indexed by training topic were available to offices.

Disability Processing Resource Site was created in July 2011 for disability-related policy, training, and other resources to be readily accessible to staff processing disability claims. The site contains links to most policy-compliant materials.

IVT and VOD

IVT is an interactive, distance learning tool that enables SSA to deliver live training broadcasts to multiple offices. SSA publishes the IVT Program schedule online. In addition, SSA converts live IVTs to VODs that are available for use in future training.
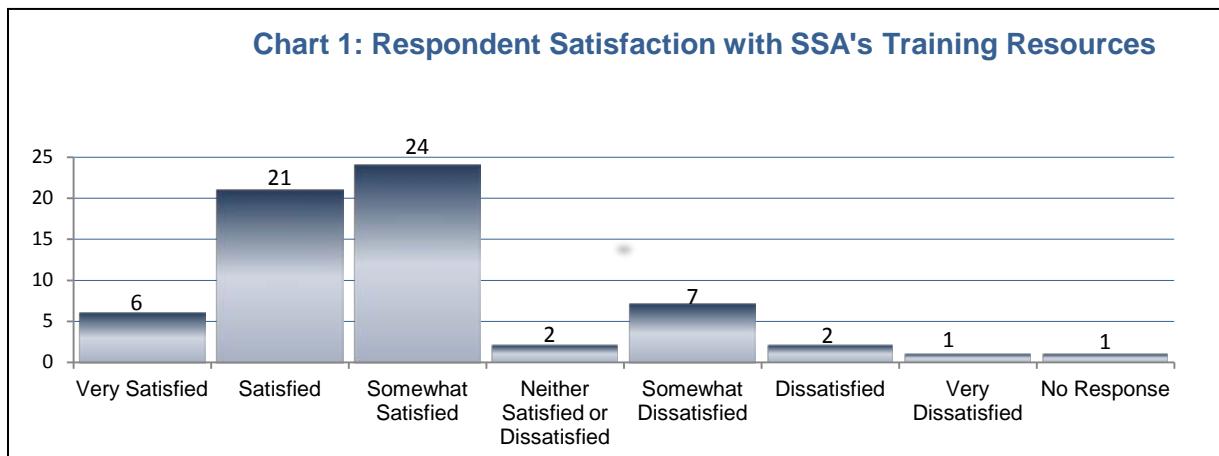
VOD is a comprehensive library of over 300 video training lessons including computer skills, disability topics, and general training. VOD content comes from the IVT broadcasts. The VOD's are indexed and available on OL's Website.

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[6] 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1622 and 416.1022. SSA, POMS, DI 39521.100 (March 21, 2002).

RESPONSES FROM OFFICES THAT MAKE DISABILITY DECISIONS

To obtain information about how offices used SSA's training materials, we contacted 65 offices that made disability determinations. Of the 65 offices, 64 (98 percent) responded, and most were generally satisfied with the Agency's training resources[7] (see Chart 1).

Chart 1: Respondent Satisfaction with SSA's Training Resources

Category	Value
Very Satisfied	6
Satisfied	21
Somewhat Satisfied	24
Neither Satisfied or Dissatisfied	2
Somewhat Dissatisfied	7
Dissatisfied	2
Very Dissatisfied	1
No Response	1

Using Training Resources

Offices use SSA's training resources to educate new and existing staff. For example, when training a new disability examiner, offices generally use SSA's DEBTP as the primary resource. Offices also use SSA IVTs, VODs, and training cases. In addition, offices mentor new examiners and monitor their work. According to SSA, newly hired examiners can make some, but not all, disability determinations within a few months; however, it takes an average of 2 years of training for a newly hired disability examiner to become proficient.

Offices also use SSA's training materials to keep existing staff informed. For example, when SSA updates policies, offices use memorandums or IVTs to distribute information.

Supplementing Training Resources

While offices were generally satisfied with SSA's training resources, they also supplemented those resources by creating their own. Of the 64 offices, 61 created supplemental training materials. Moreover, several offices created materials for the same training topics. For instance, of the 64 offices:

* 36 supplemented SSA's DEBTP training. For example, one office created additional DEBTP handouts, manuals, and exercises as well as several presentations dedicated to each body system. Another office created presentations with links to medical sites, graphics, and interactive Websites for body system training.

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[7] In this report, we generally discuss the concerns of offices dissatisfied with SSA's training resources.

- 18 supplemented SSA's continuing disability review (CDR) training material.[8] For example, one office prepared an electronic CDR manual and handouts for staff to reference. Another office created a different CDR handbook for its staff.

- 15 created and maintained an internal training repository—such as an Intranet site or database—of SSA's training materials. For example, one office maintained a Website with links to SSA's electronic training resources. Another office maintained a site of SSA user guides and other reference materials.

- 7 supplemented SSA's case studies. For example, 1 office created approximately 40 sample claims. This office reported it took significant time and resources to keep these sample claims current. Another office also reported maintaining its own sample case bank.

Furthermore, some offices reported spending approximately more than 2 weeks creating supplemental training materials. Because SSA funds each office's necessary costs, it is paying for these duplicative efforts.[9]

Suggestions to Improve Training Resources

While some offices pointed out SSA's recent efforts to improve training resources, some also suggested areas for SSA to continue to improve training resources. For instance:

- 19 offices indicated a need for more varied training materials to accommodate different learning styles. For example, one office mentioned that complex topics are sometimes difficult for trainees to understand. Therefore, it suggested that it would be beneficial to have training topics available in different formats to provide more flexibility in training for offices. Another office suggested this would aid smaller offices that may not have the staff available to create alternate training materials.

- 16 offices indicated a need for more complex case studies. For example, case studies that included claim denials, childhood impairments, reconsiderations, and CDRs.[10] One office suggested that SSA provide these cases to share among all offices.

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[8] After SSA determines an individual to be disabled, it is required to conduct periodic CDRs to determine whether the individual continues to be disabled. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1589 and 416.989.

[9] The _Social Security Act_ §§ 221(e) and 1633(a), 42 U.S.C §§ 421(e) and 1383b(a). _See also_, 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1626 and 416.1026.

[10] In December 2011, SSA informed us it was creating additional case studies to include claim denials, childhood impairments, reconsiderations, and CDRs.

- 13 offices indicated the need for a national Website of training resources. In addition, some offices indicated the need for more communication and sharing of materials. For example, an office commented that because each office is responsible for its own training needs, it leads to duplication of efforts nationwide. Therefore, SSA should facilitate the sharing of locally created training materials.

SSA TOOLS SUPPORTING OFFICES' TRAINING EFFORTS

SSA has developed several tools that aid offices with disability staff training. Examples follow.

- ➢ **Electronic Case Analysis Tool (eCAT)**—documents the disability adjudicator's analysis and ensures the adjudicator considered all relevant SSA policies during the process. In a prior review, we determined eCAT had a positive effect on disability examiner training.[11]

- ➢ **Policy Feedback System**—gathers and analyzes disability processing data to identify areas for policy changes or improvements.

- ➢ **Request for Program Consultation**—supports the process of resolving program-related disagreements between offices that make disability determinations and the Office of Quality Performance (OQP).[12] The application creates a repository of information related to these requests and allows database searches for specific program consultations.[13]

- ➢ **Vocational Policy Training Webpage**—provides training resources such as; VODs, links to case studies, desk aids, and flowcharts. These resources are accessible by anyone within SSA's system and organized alphabetically by topic, which enables users to find all materials on a particular topic at once.

Suggestions to Improve Training Tools

Some respondents indicated training materials should replicate the current production environment. For instance, training materials should incorporate all the tools—such as eCAT.

For example, one office suggested SSA add eCAT functionality to the DEBTP. Another office suggested that sample cases include eCAT and eView—which provides access to

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[11] SSA OIG, *Quick Response Evaluation: The Effects of the Electronic Claims Analysis Tool* (A-01-11-21193), July 2011.

[12] OQP conducts quality reviews, studies, and statistical analyses of SSA programs, business processes, and services delivery; assesses the accuracy of programmatic payments and transactions; and recommends corrective changes in programs, policies, procedures, or legislation.

[13] As of March 2012, we were assessing SSA's Request for Program Consultation process in our review titled *Resolving Issues Identified During the Social Security Administration's Quality Reviews of Disability Determinations* (A-01-11-11119).

the electronic disability folder and capability to print folder information. According to one office, this would provide training on all aspects of case processing that offices regularly use.

SSA's EFFORTS TO IMPROVE AND STREAMLINE TRAINING RESOURCES

SSA has sought to improve and streamline training resources. For instance, SSA has cross-component workgroups to develop training for offices that make disability determinations. These workgroups include the following.

➢ **National Disability Training Cadre**—established in December 2000, comprises select volunteer trainers.[14] During their 3-year term, Cadre members update disability training materials as well as host and write scripts for training videos.

➢ **Training Advisory Committee (TAC)**—established in October 2010, identifies training needs, gives input to SSA components that create training materials, and helps market the training tools.[15] Since December 2010, TAC meets monthly to plan and prioritize training resources.

➢ **Unified Disability Training (UDT)**—established in February 2011, identifies disability training needs and recommends methods to address those needs across adjudicative levels.[16] SSA envisions the UDT will result in a more effective use of training resources, a greater understanding of the adjudication process by all disability staff, and more sound adjudication of disability claims. As of December 2011, the UDT had one online training lesson; however, the goal is to develop additional lessons.

In May 2011, the Agency began developing the Disability Information Gateway Resource tool—a more extensive Web application that would consolidate all links to disability resources and training materials into a searchable database. According to SSA, this application will be in a central location that individuals at all levels of the disability adjudicative process can go to for their resource and training needs. Additionally, SSA created a national disability examiner training package for CDRs— which it anticipates being a priority workload in Fiscal Year 2012.

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[14] The National Disability Training Cadre includes volunteer trainers from the DDS, ODP, OQP, the Office of Disability Adjudication and Review (ODAR), and regional and field offices.

[15] The TAC workgroup includes members from the DDSs, ODD, ODP, OL, and the regional offices. TAC uses a two-prong approach to identify DDS training needs: one group identifies training materials for DDS examiners and medical consultants and the other group identifies and recommends materials for participants in Management and Leadership training.

[16] The UDT workgroup includes members from ODAR, ODD, ODP, OL, OQP, and the Office of Public Service and Operations Support.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SSA provided training resources to offices that made disability determinations; however, we found that offices required additional support. While the offices were generally satisfied with SSA's training resources, they supplemented these resources by creating their own. Moreover, several offices created materials for the same training topics. Thus, SSA was funding these duplicative efforts. Additionally, offices indicated that training materials should replicate the production environment.

Therefore, as SSA streamlines and improves training resources for offices that make disability determinations, we recommend the Agency:

1. Promote communication among offices that make disability determinations to minimize duplicative efforts.

2. Ensure training materials incorporate all the applications adjudicators use regularly (such as eCAT, eView, and case processing systems).

AGENCY COMMENTS

SSA agreed with the recommendations. See Appendix D.

Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr.

Appendices

APPENDIX A – Acronyms

APPENDIX B – Federal Unit and Disability Determination Services Staffing

APPENDIX C – Scope and Methodology

APPENDIX D – Agency Comments

APPENDIX E – OIG Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

Acronyms

CDR	Continuing Disability Review
C.F.R.	Code of Federal Regulations
DDS	Disability Determination Services
DEBTP	Disability Examiner Basic Training Program
eCAT	Electronic Case Analysis Tool
EST	Extended Service Team
FY	Fiscal Year
IVT	Interactive Video Teletraining
ODAR	Office of Disability Adjudication and Review
ODD	Office of Disability Determinations
ODP	Office of Disability Programs
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
OL	Office of Learning
OQP	Office of Quality Performance
POMS	Program Operations Manual System
SSA	Social Security Administration
TAC	Training Advisory Committee
UDT	Unified Disability Training
U.S.C.	United States Code
VOD	Video On Demand

Federal Unit and Disability Determination Services Staffing

According to the Social Security Administration, as of September 2011, offices that made disability determinations employed 17,969 staff, including 8,656 disability examiners and 152 disability examiner trainees. See Table B-1 for details.

Table B-1: Federal Unit and DDS Staffing by Location as of September 2011			
Office	**Disability Examiners**	**Disability Examiner Trainees**	**Total Staff**
Alabama	183	68	477
Alaska	11	-	28
Arizona	111	-	269
Arkansas	163	-	283
Arkansas Extended Service Team (EST)[1]	73	-	117
Atlanta Region	79	-	116
Boston Region	6	-	18
California	666	-	1,481
Chicago Region	72	-	102
Colorado	76	-	153
Connecticut	67	6	158
Dallas Region	44	-	69
Delaware	24	-	51
Denver Region	8	-	16
District of Columbia	26	-	60
Florida	653	-	1,207
Georgia	254	-	567
Hawaii	20	-	58
Idaho	29	3	77
Illinois	195	28	529
Indiana	161	-	328
Iowa	75	-	152
Kansas	48	-	113
Kansas City Region	73	-	103

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[1] ESTs are specialized units in the DDSs dedicated to assisting other State DDSs in processing disability claims.

Table B-1: Federal Unit and DDS Staffing by Location as of September 2011			
Office	Disability Examiners	Disability Examiner Trainees	Total Staff
Kentucky	229	-	421
Louisiana	117	-	291
Maine	36	-	76
Maryland	123	-	263
Massachusetts	180	-	354
Michigan	279	-	618
Minnesota	95	-	204
Mississippi	121	16	278
Mississippi EST	24	-	42
Missouri	205	-	402
Montana	22	3	56
Nebraska	39	-	92
Nevada	55	-	118
New Hampshire	26	-	59
New Jersey	189	18	355
New Mexico	45	-	92
New York	492	-	925
New York Region	65	-	94
North Carolina	299	-	638
North Dakota	11	-	32
Ohio	333	-	636
Oklahoma	126	-	253
Oklahoma EST	34	-	54
Office of Disability Operations	60	-	60
Office of International Operations	12	-	12
Office of Medical and Vocational Expertise	30	-	93
Oregon	90	-	181
Pennsylvania	307	-	735
Philadelphia Region	70	-	100
Puerto Rico	83	-	159
Rhode Island	28	-	64
San Francisco Region	72	-	105
Seattle Region	6	-	20
South Carolina	175	-	425

Table B-1: Federal Unit and DDS Staffing by Location as of September 2011			
Office	Disability Examiners	Disability Examiner Trainees	Total Staff
South Dakota	18	-	44
Tennessee	214	-	529
Texas	522	1	1,027
Utah	37	4	94
Vermont	13	5	51
Virginia	182	-	409
Virginia EST	49	-	87
Washington	168	-	384
West Virginia	100	-	236
Wisconsin	150	-	244
Wyoming	8	-	25
TOTAL	8,656	152	17,969

Scope and Methodology

To accomplish our objective, we:

- Reviewed applicable sections of the *Social Security Act* and the Social Security Administration's (SSA) regulations, policies, and procedures as well as other applicable Federal regulations.

- Reviewed prior Office of the Inspector General reports.

- Obtained and evaluated information on SSA's training resources available to offices that make disability determinations by contacting officials and staff from the 52 disability determinations services; 13 Federal units; and the Offices of Disability Determinations (ODD), Disability Programs, and Learning as well as the Centers for Disability in each regional office.[1]

- Provided SSA the information obtained from these offices. Our intent was to ensure SSA received <u>all</u> feedback to improve training resources, including items not discussed in this report. Before transmittal, we omitted any information that would identify a specific office or location.

We performed our review between July and December 2011 in Boston, Massachusetts. The principal entity audited was ODD under the Office of the Deputy Commissioner for Operations. We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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[1] The DDSs process initial and reconsideration claims for SSA and are in each of the 50 States plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. The Federal units assist the DDSs with processing disability claims. Federal units are located in each of SSA's 10 regions plus 3 offices at Agency headquarters—the Offices of Disability Operations, International Operations, and Medical and Vocational Expertise.

Agency Comments

MEMORANDUM

Date:	March 1, 2012

Refer To: S1J-3

To: Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr.
        Inspector General

From: Dean S. Landis   /s/
        Deputy Chief of Staff

Subject: Office of the Inspector General Draft Report, "Training at Offices that Make Disability
           Determinations"(A-01-11-21169)—INFORMATION

Thank you for the opportunity to review the draft report. Please see our attached comments.

Please let me know if we can be of further assistance. You may direct staff inquiries to
Teresa Rojas, at (410) 966-7284.

Attachment

COMMENTS ON THE OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL DRAFT REPORT, "TRAINING AT OFFICES THAT MAKE DISABILITY DETERMINATIONS" (A-01-11-21169)

Recommendation 1

Promote communication among offices that make disability determinations to minimize duplicative efforts.

Response

We agree.

Recommendation 2

Ensure training materials incorporate all the applications adjudicators use regularly (such as eCAT, eView, and case processing systems).

Response

We agree.

OIG Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

OIG Contacts

Judith Oliveira, Director, Boston Audit Division

Phillip Hanvy, Audit Manager

Acknowledgments

In addition to those named above:

Katie Toli, Auditor

For additional copies of this report, please visit our Website at http://oig.ssa.gov/ or contact the Office of the Inspector General's Public Affairs Staff at (410) 965-4518. Refer to Common Identification Number A-01-11-21169.

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Chairman and Ranking Minority Member, Senate Special Committee on Aging

Social Security Advisory Board

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