

Report Summary

Social Security Administration Office of the Inspector General

April 2012



Objective

To assess the role of National Hearing Centers (NHC) in reducing the hearings backlog

Background

The Office of Disability Adjudication and Review operates five NHCs in Falls Church, Virginia; Baltimore, Maryland; St. Louis, Missouri; Chicago, Illinois; and Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The NHCs are part of the Social Security Administration's (SSA) strategy to address the pending hearings backlog and reduce case processing time by increasing adjudicatory capacity and efficiency with a focus on an electronic hearings process. Administrative law judges (ALJ) at the NHCs use video technology to conduct all their hearings. ALJs at the NHCs conduct video hearings with claimants in hearing offices or other sites nationwide.

To view the full report, visit <http://oig.ssa.gov/audits-and-investigations/audit-reports/A-12-11-11147>

The Role of National Hearing Centers in Reducing the Hearings Backlog (A-12-11-11147)

Our Findings

During Fiscal Years 2010 and 2011, the 5 NHCs processed more than 56,000 hearings to assist backlogged hearing offices with older cases. We found the ALJs working in the NHCs had a higher than average disposition rate that may have related to such factors as (1) a higher decision writer-to-ALJ ratio, (2) how attorneys are supervised, (3) the lack of travel to remote sites, (4) useful pre-hearing briefs, and (5) the processing of NHC remands at the hearing office level. However, the NHCs identified a number of challenges that may limit the effectiveness of the NHC model, including (1) availability of video capacity, (2) difficulties scheduling experts, and (3) claimants declining video hearings. The assisted hearing offices we contacted stated case transfers to the NHCs led to fewer pending cases and improved processing times. The hearing offices also had a few concerns, including their processing of NHC remands as well as the extra work related to declined video hearings.

Our Recommendations

To enhance the NHC model, we recommended SSA:

1. Monitor video capacity, and as resources permit, consider increasing the number of video locations, which may include permanent remote sites, claimant-only video sites, and Representative Video Project locations.
2. Ensure steps are taken to prevent claimants from choosing the ALJ hearing their case, such as removing the ALJ's name from all hearing notices and reminding schedulers not to reveal the name of the ALJ when asked by a claimant representative.
3. Consider modifying the regulations to prevent claimants from declining video hearings close to the day of the hearing.

SSA agreed with the recommendations.