

Report Summary

Social Security Administration Office of the Inspector General

September 2009



Objective

Our objectives were to (1) assess the age of the pending claims in the hearings backlog, (2) identify obstacles that prevented claims from being processed timely, and (3) identify best practices that can assist in reducing the aged claim backlog.

Background

Since Fiscal Year (FY) 2000, hearing receipts have generally exceeded dispositions, resulting in an increase in the number of hearings pending and aging claims. While there were 310,852 pending claims at the end of FY 2000, this number increased to 760,813 claims by the end of FY 2008. In FY 2007, the Agency began the *Aged Claim* initiative, which emphasized processing the oldest claims in the backlog.

To view the full report, visit
<http://www.ssa.gov/oig/ADO/BEPDF/A-12-08-18071.pdf>

Aged Claims at the Hearing Level (A-12-08-18071)

Our Findings

At the beginning of FY 2009, approximately 38 percent of the pending claims exceeded 1 year in age, and about 4 percent exceeded 2 years. While the percent and number of aged claims over 1 year old have stabilized, the number of such claims was three times higher than it was at the end of FY 2002. The Office of Disability Adjudication and Review's (ODAR) managers said that (1) a lack of resources, (2) conflicting priorities in the past and (3) misplaced or time-consuming claims have added to the backlog of aged claims. The *Aged Claim* initiative has successfully targeted aged claims and focused hearing offices' efforts on this workload. In addition, ODAR has implemented related initiatives to assist regions and hearing offices in processing large aged workloads, such as service area realignments, permanent case transfers, and National Hearing Centers (NHC). As the NHCs expand their workloads, we believe they should be integrated with the aged case workload. Finally, the best practices that helped reduce aged claims included sustained leadership and focus, clear workload milestones, flexibility in moving workloads between offices, and use of management information reports.

Our Recommendations

We recommended SSA:

1. Ensure sustained focus on working the oldest claims first even after the *Aged Claim* initiative has ended;
2. Instruct field office managers on the importance of providing claim folders to the hearing offices to allow for timely processing; and
3. As the NHCs expand their workload, ensure they are integrated into Agency efforts to minimize the volume of aged claims.

The Agency concurred with our recommendations.