

Report Summary

Social Security Administration Office of the Inspector General

November 2010



Objective

To determine the impact of the Findings Integrated Templates (FIT) and the Decision Writer Statistical Index (DWSI) initiatives on the timeliness and quality of written decisions.

Background

Administrative law judge (ALJ) decisions are written in most cases by decision writers (DW) who are generally paralegals or attorneys. FIT was designed to address quality issues in ALJ decisions, notably legal error or poorly articulated rationale. FIT provides templates in 14 categories that cover the majority of decisional outcomes. Each template provides an analytical framework designed to ensure the relevant issues are addressed in a decision. The Social Security Administration (SSA) implemented DWSI to improve the timeliness of the draft decisions the ALJs receive from DWs and to assess DW productivity.

To view the full report, visit <http://www.ssa.gov/oig/ADO/BEPDF/A-02-09-19068.pdf>

Office of Disability Adjudication and Review Decision-Writing Process (A-02-09-19068)

Our Findings

While the average number of decisions drafted by DWs each day had increased on average since FIT and DWSI were introduced, we were unable to determine whether the recommended decision-writing timeframes established by DWSI were met. The Office of Disability Adjudication and Review (ODAR) did not measure decision-writing times. In terms of quality, FIT helped provide uniformity and consistency in written decisions, and the percentage of remanded cases from the Appeals Council was lower after FIT and DWSI were introduced. Still, staff reported FIT did not cover all possible decision-writing scenarios, and some improvements were possible.

Our Recommendations

We recommend that SSA:

1. Measure the time DWs take to draft decisions, which would allow ODAR management to measure the impact of initiatives implemented to reduce decision-writing times.
2. Determine whether guidance within FIT could be improved to better guide DWs to include adequate rationales for the conclusion outlined in the decisions they draft.
3. Add more templates to address non-disability issues not currently covered by FIT if it is cost-beneficial to do so.
4. Modify FIT to ensure DWs do not have to enter inaccurate information to make certain cases work within FIT.
5. Encourage DWs and ALJs to use FIT to ensure decisions are consistently drafted.
6. Identify the ALJs who use non-FIT templates and assess whether the templates they created provide any useful lessons on how to improve the FIT process.

SSA agreed with recommendations two through six. Although it disagreed with our first recommendation, we continue to believe it is important to measure the timeliness of the hearings process.