

Report Summary

Social Security Administration Office of the Inspector General

April 2011



Objective

To assess the ongoing implementation and use of video hearing technology in the Office of Disability Adjudication and Review (ODAR).

Background

Video hearings enable administrative law judges (ALJ) to hold video hearings at permanent remote sites as well as to hear cases transferred among ODAR's offices in different cities nationwide. A video hearing allows the claimant and other hearing participants to see and hear each other via color monitor. The ALJ remains in his or her office, and the claimant goes to a site convenient to where he or she lives. Except for the equipment, a video hearing is virtually the same as a hearing where the claimant appears in person. The judge interacts with the claimant and anyone accompanying the claimant, such as a representative or a witness.

To view the full report, visit:
<http://www.ssa.gov/oig/ADO/BEPDF/A-05-08-18070.pdf>

Use of Video Hearings to Reduce the Hearing Case Backlog (A-05-08-18070)

Our Findings

The number of hearings increased by 260 percent over a 4-year period, from 23,418 in Fiscal Year (FY) 2005 to 84,121 in FY 2009. Approximately 18 percent of all hearings was conducted by video in FY 2009. Video usage varied from 34.8 percent of all hearings in the Boston Region to 9 percent in the New York Region. Moreover, the Atlanta Region held approximately 26 percent of all video hearings held nationwide in FY 2009, double the next highest Region, Dallas, at 13 percent.

Hearing office video usage varied widely, with approximately 22 percent of the hearing offices using video equipment for less than 1 percent of their hearings. We also found that 19 percent of ALJs did not use the equipment at all in FY 2009. In our discussions with ALJs, we learned that low video use related to factors such as workloads, preferred work styles, equipment problems, and lack of training.

The video hearing technology has provided the Agency with greater flexibility in allocating hearing workloads and addressing backlogs nationwide. In addition, the cost of this equipment has been reduced as smaller, less expensive units become available for ALJs. Moreover, some private firms have installed video equipment in their own facilities. Finally, we found cases processed with video hearings took more time than in-person hearings mostly because of the age of the cases being targeted.

Our Recommendations

We recommended SSA (1) periodically evaluate video hearing equipment requirements at each location against historical and expected usage prior to procuring new equipment and (2) consider expanding the use of small, less expensive video units to all interested ALJs. SSA agreed with our recommendations.