

Workload Review of the Office of Hearings Operations' Atlanta and New York Regions A-12-18-50285



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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To review the hearing office performance and regional management support for two Office of Hearings Operations (OHO) regions that had a disproportionate number of the lowest-ranking hearing offices in terms of average processing time.

Background

The Social Security Administration (SSA) has divided the country into 10 regions, and each OHO regional office is responsible for all matters involving the hearing process in that region. Each OHO regional office provides direction, leadership, management, and guidance to the regional office staff and the hearing offices in the region. It is responsible for the regional implementation of national policies—such as the Compassionate And REsponsive Service (CARES) plan—and formulates policies and objectives for the administrative law judges and support staff in the region.

OHO's Atlanta Regional Office provides oversight and support to 37 hearing offices in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, and Tennessee.

OHO's New York Regional Office provides oversight and support to 16 offices in New York, New Jersey, and Puerto Rico.

Findings

The hearing offices in both regions with high average processing times (APT) had below-average staffing levels, low morale, and issues with telework, claimant representatives, and the quality of the support staff's work. Other factors, such as administrative law judge performance issues, difficulty scheduling expert witnesses, and a large number of supplemental hearings/postponements also contributed to high APT. In the New York Region, local office management issues and State filing requirements were also negative factors. In the Atlanta Region, an insufficient number of decision writers and information technology problems were negative factors.

In the New York Region, several interviewees cited their Regional Office as a negative factor that contributed to higher APT and lower productivity. The issues that interviewees cited included Regional Office micromanagement, excessive time and oversight devoted to minor issues, goals not agreeing with real capabilities, negative messaging/tone, and frequent changes implemented with little notice or input.

The New York Regional Office generally agreed with our findings but explained that a few offices require closer regional level oversight for a variety of reasons, including inexperienced or underperforming managers, failure to follow established policy and procedures, and employee conduct or performance matters. Some interviewees in the Atlanta Region cited similar issues with their Regional Office, though the feedback was more mixed.

Recommendation

We recommend that SSA work with the New York and Atlanta Regional Offices and their hearing offices to address the issues identified in this report that affected processing times.

We did not include specific recommendations for issues identified in this report that SSA is working on as part of its CARES plan. We also did not include specific recommendations related to adequate support staff numbers and telework that SSA is still addressing from prior Office of the Inspector General reports.

SSA agreed with the recommendation.