

The Social Security Administration's Progress in Reducing the Initial Disability Claims Backlog

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To review the Social Security Administration's (SSA) actions to reduce its initial disability claims backlog.

Background

In November 2010, SSA released its *Strategy to Address Increasing Initial Disability Claims Receipts* (Strategy). The Strategy outlined four objectives to address the increase in initial claims and the growing pending levels. These objectives were to (1) increase staffing at disability determination services (DDS) and Federal disability processing units, (2) improve efficiency through automation, (3) expand the use of screening tools to streamline claims likely to be allowed, and (4) refine policies and business processes to expedite cases.

Our Findings

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2010, SSA expected initial disability claims pending would exceed 1 million. Therefore, SSA established a goal to achieve a pending level of 525,000 initial disability claims by FY 2014. SSA took actions to reduce the initial disability claims backlog. As a result, SSA reduced the backlog from a high of about 842,000 claims at the end of FY 2010 to 698,000 claims by the end of FY 2013.

Based on SSA's most recent projections for initial claims receipts and clearances, the pending level will not reach the levels previously expected. With the FY 2014 funding level and the funding level anticipated for FY 2015, SSA expects to make progress in reducing the initial claims backlog while keeping average processing times consistent. If the anticipated funding and productivity remain unchanged, SSA and OIG's collective estimates indicate the pending level will remain lower than the FY 2013 level through FY 2016. However, the pending level will not be reduced to 525,000 claims.

According to SSA, because of budget uncertainty, it was no longer striving to achieve its previous pending level goal of 525,000 claims, and it had not established a new goal for an ideal pending level. To reduce initial disability claims pending to an ideal level, it is important to have a goal. Further, the goal must be attainable within a timeframe allowed by SSA's resources and take into consideration an acceptable processing time for initial claims and other workloads that need DDS resources.

Our Recommendation

We recommend that SSA establish a goal for an ideal initial disability claims pending level with an acceptable claims processing time and a timeframe to reach the goal.

SSA agreed with our recommendation.