

Report Summary

Social Security Administration Office of the Inspector General

June 2012



Objective

Our objective was to assess the legislative and administrative options, including potential challenges, for expanding access to video hearings at the Social Security Administration (SSA). As part of this review, we assessed costs and benefits to claimants, claimant representatives, and taxpayers related to the current use and potential expansion of video hearings at SSA's Office of Disability Adjudication and Review (ODAR).

Background

The *Managers Report* accompanying SSA's Fiscal Year 2012 appropriations (signed December 23, 2011) requested a report by the Office of the Inspector General to address the objective stated above. The conferees noted a recent report by another Federal agency that referred to ODAR's use of video technology as a model for other agencies.

To view the full report, visit <http://oig.ssa.gov/audits-and-investigations/audit-reports/A-05-12-21287>

Congressional Response Report: Current and Expanded Use of Video Hearings (A-05-12-21287)

Our Findings

We noted in prior reports that video teleconferencing (VTC) has given SSA additional flexibility in handling its aged and backlogged hearing requests. The 10 ODAR regional management teams informed us they found video hearings reduced hearing office backlogs, improved case processing times, and decreased administrative law judge (ALJ) travel to remote sites. However, VTC is only one of a number of Agency initiatives that contributed to improved hearing timeliness, and determining the contribution of each initiative is difficult.

While SSA monitors its hearing costs, the Agency's ability to separately measure and break out video hearing costs was limited. We reviewed a 2009 consultant study designed to identify the cost and benefits of VTC, which another Federal agency later cited as showing annual savings of \$59 million, which is \$595 million over 10 years. We adjusted the consultant's calculations and found that the estimated annual savings ranged from \$5.2 to \$10.9 million, which would range from \$52 to \$109 million over 10 years. Despite the data limitations and amended savings, we believe the Agency should evaluate how it monitors video hearings costs to accurately report cost savings and determine expansion options.

The Agency plans to expand the use of VTC, though claimant and ALJ preferences as well as video capacity could slow down such efforts. Some of the options ODAR has for expanding video capacity include greater use of field offices, law office sites, and government sites. Relocation of unused equipment and expanded use of desktop video units could also increase the available capacity for video hearings. Moreover, the Agency is considering regulations to prevent reimbursement of travel costs for claimants and their representatives when the claimant objects to a scheduled video hearing and therefore must travel with their representative to a farther location for an in-person hearing.