

Completeness of the Social Security Administration's Disability Claims Files

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To determine whether staff fully developed all available medical evidence before making a disability determination.

Background

Claimants are required to prove they are disabled by providing medical and other evidence of disability. However, the Social Security Administration (SSA) is responsible for making every reasonable effort to help the claimant get medical reports from medical sources. The Agency considers all evidence in the claimant's case record when it makes any determination.

On February 20, 2014, SSA's Notice of Proposed Rulemaking—*Submission of Evidence in Disability Claims*—was published in the Federal Register. This proposed regulation would require that claimants inform the Agency about, or submit all evidence known to them that relates to, their disability claim (subject to two exceptions).

We identified a population of 627,587 individuals who had a hearing decision in Fiscal Year 2012. From this population, we reviewed a sample of 275 cases to determine whether, at the initial or reconsideration level, the disability determination services (DDS) could have obtained any evidence provided at the hearing level. If the evidence was available at the time of the initial or reconsideration level, we determined why it was not obtained.

Additionally, we determined whether the Office of Disability Adjudication and Review (ODAR) obtained medical evidence from all sources alleged by the claimant at the hearing level.

Our Findings

Staff did not always obtain all existing medical evidence before making a disability determination. Although DDSs generally followed policy, we found staff was unable to obtain all evidence at the initial and reconsideration levels because the claimant did not tell them about all sources or the sources did not respond to the DDS' requests. Additionally, ODAR staff did not always obtain all existing evidence at the hearing level and did not follow the regulations and policies to make every reasonable effort to obtain evidence and document the attempts in the disability folder.

Based on our sample results, we estimated that about 214,500 cases contained medical evidence at the hearing level that did not appear in the file at the DDS level, even though it existed at the time. Additionally, we estimated that about 235,000 claimants reported medical sources when requesting a hearing, but ODAR did not obtain medical evidence from them.

Our Recommendation

We recommend that SSA remind ODAR staff to follow the regulations and policies to make every reasonable effort to obtain all evidence and document attempts in the disability folder.

SSA agreed with the recommendation.