

Reducing Processing Centers' Pending Actions 022313



June 2024

Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) met its performance measure to reduce the number of pending actions at processing centers (PC).

Background

SSA's eight PCs support field and hearing offices by handling appeal decisions, collecting debt, correcting records, performing program integrity work, and processing other complex Social Security retirement, survivors, and disability benefit payment decisions.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2018, SSA established a performance measure on reducing the number of pending actions at PCs to improve customer service. The goal for the PC pending actions performance measure varies each year; annual goals are a projection of what SSA determines it can achieve based on expected resources and workloads for an upcoming FY.

Results

SSA met its annual PC pending actions performance measure goal in 4 of the 6 FYs between FY 2018 through 2023. SSA reported it did not meet its goals in the remaining 2 FYs because of unexpected staff reductions, increased workloads, and less than expected overtime funding it would have used to pay employees to process more PC pending actions.

Although SSA achieved its PC pending actions performance goals in 4 of the last 6 FYs, there was no overall reduction in PC pending actions over those 6 years. In fact, the PC pending actions backlog increased from 3.2 million in FY 2018 to 4.6 million in FY 2023. As the backlog grows, many PC pending actions remain unresolved for long periods of time. From a sample of 139 pending actions, 102 (73 percent) were pending for 300 days or more, with 60 of the 102 pending for 500 days or more.

Delays in processing PC pending actions can lead to higher improper payments, which increased some beneficiaries' financial burden as they waited longer for underpayments or were charged with increased overpayment amounts. If SSA resolved the PC pending actions we reviewed at the earliest possible instance, we estimate it would have determined approximately 528,000 beneficiaries were improperly paid approximately \$534 million. After the pending actions were not processed for 12 months, the improper payment amount for those same beneficiaries rose to approximately \$756 million. By the time of our review, many of the PC pending actions had been pending for longer than 12 months, and the improper payment amount had increased to approximately \$1.1 billion.

Recommendations

We made three recommendations with which SSA agreed:

1. Develop a workload and staffing plan to ensure the pending actions backlog is reduced from year to year.
2. Develop PC pending actions performance measures with goals to reduce the pending actions backlog from year to year.
3. Establish timeframe targets for PC workloads to limit increases to improper payments caused by processing delays and the burden they place on beneficiaries.