

The COVID-19 Pandemic's Effect on Disability Determination Services' Processing of Disability Claims

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To determine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the disability determination services' (DDS) processing of disability claims.

Background

A consultative examination (CE) is a physical or mental examination or test purchased from a medical source, at SSA's request and expense, to provide evidence for a claimant's disability or blindness claim.

Generally, SSA will not request a CE until it has made every reasonable effort to obtain needed evidence from the claimant's medical sources.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic. On March 17, 2020, SSA closed its offices to the public and suspended or cancelled all in-person CEs. DDSs experienced periodic closures related to the pandemic. SSA also authorized DDSs to allow their employees to work from home to process disability claims.

On May 29, 2020, SSA informed the DDSs they could resume in-person CEs—prioritizing scheduling CEs for claims pending at either the initial or reconsideration level. SSA left it up to each DDS to manage how it reinstated CEs. In doing so, each DDS had to determine when to re-instate in-person CEs, considering the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as well as state, local, tribal, and territorial government guidelines regarding non-essential medical appointments and social-distancing requirements.

Results

While SSA received fewer initial claims during the pandemic, it took the DDSs longer to process them than the year before. Before the pandemic, DDS' average processing time for an initial claim was 95.5 days. This increased to 139.4 days and 135.5 days, respectively, during the first and second years of the pandemic. Numerous factors contributed to this:

- **CEs** - The number of CEs performed during the pandemic decreased, as SSA suspended in-person CEs for a period of time. Once DDSs resumed in-person CEs, they still had issues scheduling CEs because for example, (1) not all CE providers returned to conducting CEs and (2) claimants refused to attend in-person CEs because of fear of exposure to COVID-19.
- **DDS Staffing and Training** – About 4,000 DDS employees resigned or retired during the pandemic, but DDSs hired 4,305 employees during this same time. However, it takes a newly hired disability examiner an average of 2 years to become proficient at processing most initial claim workloads.
- **Telework and Communication with Claimants** – During the pandemic, most DDS employees teleworked, so the DDSs needed to adjust to how they processed certain workloads. SSA provided the DDSs with basic cellular telephones to communicate with claimants, but claimants were wary of answering the calls as the telephones' caller identification did not show the incoming call was from a state agency.
- **Policies and Procedures** – During the pandemic, SSA updated policies and procedures on how the DDS should operate. The updates included combined instructions with the field office, which confused some DDS employees about what pertained specifically to DDS processes.

DDSs will continue various best practices they implemented during the pandemic, including scheduling tele-health CEs, when possible; telework; and holding video meetings. SSA is seeking additional funds for DDSs in its Fiscal Year 2024 budget request. The requested funding should allow DDSs to recruit and retain employees as well as process more claims. If DDSs can reduce processing times, claimants will receive their benefit payments sooner. This will ensure claimants can purchase such essentials as food, clothing, shelter, and medical care.