

The Social Security Administration's Processing of Priority Cases

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) properly identified, expedited, and processed disability applications that qualified as a priority case.

Background

SSA processes about 2 million disability applications each year. According to SSA, the standard initial disability application can take 3 to 5 months from the application date to the date the initial determination is made. SSA identifies certain applications as priority and uses an expedited process to lessen the emotional and financial hardship claimants might experience during SSA's standard processing time.

Each year, SSA identifies at least 200,000 (10 percent) of the initial disability applications as priority cases. SSA identifies priority cases for expedited processing through a combination of automated and manual means. Policy requires that SSA develop and process cases identified as priority expeditiously.

We reviewed 668,352 claimants whose initial disability applications SSA selected for priority processing. We also reviewed 153,964 claimants who had initial disability applications that may have been eligible for priority processing.

Results

Generally, SSA properly identified, expedited, and processed initial disability applications that qualified as a priority case. SSA's selection of cases for priority processing was proper for over 96.1 percent of claimants we reviewed.

However, SSA did not expeditiously develop and process initial disability applications for 11 (6.1 percent) of 180 sampled claimants. Delays occurred because SSA did not always monitor the processing of the 11 cases that were selected for priority processing to ensure they were processed expeditiously. Further, SSA's policy does not specify overall processing timeframes and/or goals for priority cases. As a result, we estimate SSA delayed case development and processing for 40,844 claimants with priority cases.

Recommendation

We recommended SSA modify processing instructions for priority cases to include appropriate processing timeframes and follow-up procedures to support SSA and disability determination services' monitoring of processing times. SSA agreed with our recommendation.