

The Social Security Administration's Hearings Backlog and Average Processing Times

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To determine whether the Office of Hearing Operations' (OHO) Compassionate And REsponsive Service (CARES) Plan initiatives have reduced the hearings backlog and average processing times (APT).

Background

In January 2016, SSA issued the CARES Plan to reduce its pending hearings backlog to reach an average processing time of 270 days. At that time, more than 1 million people were waiting for a hearing decision and APT was 543 days.

SSA updated the CARES Plan in 2017 when the average processing time peaked at 605 days. The Plan was updated again in 2019. There were 45 total initiatives from the 3 CARES Plans.

Results

While the hearings backlog and APT generally decreased between Fiscal Years 2016 and 2022, we could not determine whether the CARES Plan initiatives reduced the hearings backlog and APT. Of the 45 CARES Plan initiatives, 42 lacked sufficient measurements or metrics to support their correlation to reducing the hearings backlog or APT. In addition, SSA could not provide documentation showing a direct link on how each specific initiative helped reduce the backlog or APT.

This occurred because SSA did not establish formal measurements to help determine how each initiative affected the hearing process. OHO believed the initiatives could not always be measured using traditional metrics. OHO leadership set general expectations of timelines and metrics needed for each initiative and set up regular update meetings with project leads. OHO noted that the project lead meetings were oral. OHO could not provide us documentation, such as meeting minutes, supporting that the initiatives reduced the hearings backlog and APT. However, according to *Federal Internal Control Standards*, management should define objectives in measurable terms so performance toward achieving those objectives can be assessed. Measurable objectives should also be stated in a quantitative or qualitative form that permits reasonable, consistent measurement.

OHO management noted, "We believe that the aggregated effect of reducing the backlog is the result of various initiatives moving the needle, even if we are unable to attribute that improvement to an individual initiative."

As a result, we and SSA could not determine whether the CARES initiatives—or a reduction in reconsideration determinations—was the reason the hearing backlog and APT decreased from Fiscal Years 2016 to 2022. Since claims denied after the requests for reconsideration are the source of claims that may be appealed to an ALJ, fewer claims would potentially flow down to OHO.

Recommendation

For future CARES Plan initiatives, SSA should establish and document metrics to measure a direct impact on the hearings backlog and APT. SSA agreed with the recommendation.