

Single Decisionmaker Model—Authority to Make Certain Disability Determinations Without a Medical Consultant’s Signature

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To gather information on the Social Security Administration’s (SSA) Single Decisionmaker (SDM) pilot for the Agency to use when it decides whether to expand or terminate the pilot.

Background

SSA’s SDM model authorizes disability examiners to make certain initial determinations without requiring a medical or psychological consultant’s signature.

In 1999, SSA started the SDM pilot in 10 disability determination services (DDS) sites—referred to as SDM prototype. Later in 1999, SSA expanded the pilot to an additional 10 DDS sites—referred to as SDM II. Therefore, 20 DDSs participated in the SDM pilot. The remaining 34 DDSs and Federal units did not have SDM authority.

Our Findings

Our review of 3,900 sample cases from the SDM prototype, SDM II and Non-SDM sites showed initial claim processing times were shorter in SDM sites than in the Non-SDM sites.

The 20 pilot sites, as well as the National Association of Disability Examiners and the National Council of Disability Determination Directors, provided feedback on the SDM model. These entities noted improved public service, DDS case processing times, and employee morale.

We noted evidence of SDM-user positive feedback and decreased case processing times for initial disability claims with the use of SDM. However, based on SSA studies showing higher initial and overall (after all appeals) disability allowance rates with the use of SDM, the Office of the Chief Actuary (OCACT) estimated significant program benefit savings to the Trust and General Funds with the gradual termination of the SDM pilot. On July 25, 2013, SSA published a Federal Register notice announcing the extension of the SDM pilot through September 26, 2014. Over the coming year, SSA will be exploring how to proceed beyond September 2014.

Our Recommendation

We recommend that SSA use the information in this report, as well as any other information (such as OCACT’s estimates), to make and implement a decision regarding the future of SDM expeditiously.

SSA agreed with the recommendation.