

Decision-writing Backlog in the Office of Hearings Operations

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To assess the Social Security Administration's (SSA) hearings decision-writing backlog and the Agency's actions to address it.

Background

The Office of Hearings Operations (OHO) administers SSA's hearings program. Since 2015, the number of cases waiting a written hearing decision has increased. At the end of Fiscal Year (FY) 2017, 75,084 cases were waiting for written decisions, almost 4 times the number than at the end of FYs 2011 and 2012. Since FY 2017, the number of pending cases has decreased, with 51,754 cases waiting for written decisions at the end of January 2019 (a 31-percent decrease since the FY 2017 peak).

SSA established national and regional Case Assistance Centers to help hearing offices prepare cases and write hearing decisions. At the end of FY 2018, OHO had decision-writing units in five National Case Assistance Centers and every Regional Case Assistance Center except the Kansas City Region. SSA also established National Hearing Centers that use video technology to hold hearings to assist backlogged offices.

In FY 2018, OHO transferred over 125,000 cases for decision-writing assistance.

Findings

Similar factors contributed to the decision-writing backlogs in hearing offices in all regions. Interviewees said the main cause of the decision-writing backlog was staffing imbalances. Interviewees also discussed others reasons for the decision-writing backlog, including issues that affected decision writer productivity. Additionally, they described actions that had worked to address writing backlogs and offered suggestions on what would help them in the future.

Although the decision-writing backlog peaked in FY 2017, it had decreased by 31 percent as of January 2019. Therefore, we did not make any recommendations. Also, we did not include specific recommendations for issues identified in this report that SSA is working on as part of its Compassionate and REsponsive Service plan. Additionally, we did not include specific recommendations that SSA is still addressing from prior Office of the Inspector General reports.