

Compassionate And REsponsive Service Plan to Reduce Pending Hearings

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To review the Office of Disability Adjudication and Review's (ODAR) *Compassionate And REsponsive Service* (CARES) plan in terms of (1) content, (2) lessons learned from earlier initiatives, (3) communication with key parties, and (4) plans for measurement and monitoring.

Background

In January 2016, ODAR issued the CARES plan, which outlined 21 initiatives to address the growing number of pending hearings and increasing wait times. According to the CARES plan, ODAR's goal is to reach an average processing time (APT) of 270 days by the end of Fiscal Year 2020. ODAR also expects the plan will help serve as a foundation to explore potential future initiatives as the Agency continues identifying ways to better serve the public.

In our November 2015 *Fiscal Year 2015 Inspector General Statement on the Agency's Major Management and Performance Challenges*, we stated reducing the hearings backlog and preventing its recurrence remains an Agency challenge. As of May 2016, approximately 1.1 million people were awaiting a hearing decision, and APT was 526 days.

Findings

Of the 21 initiatives in the January 2016 CARES plan, we determined 13 related to earlier backlog reduction plans, including the Agency's 2007 initiatives and the 2015 Critical Eight Priorities plan. The eight new initiatives in the CARES plan included, among other items, (1) new uses of technology to identify high-risk cases for review and (2) hearing office support from other Agency components. However, Congress asked the Agency to pause moving forward with one of its new initiatives, the Adjudication Augmentation Strategy, pending further conversations. Additionally, since releasing the CARES plan, ODAR added six initiatives. As a result, the Agency was tracking 27 initiatives at the time of our review.

Our reviews of earlier backlog initiatives provide a number of lessons learned, including the need for (1) baseline data to measure progress, (2) sufficient oversight, (3) pilots to test initiatives, (4) good internal and external communication, (5) legal review of initiatives, (6) comprehensive management information, and (7) reliable cost and savings data.

In terms of communication with key parties, we found that ODAR did not share its completed CARES plan with the public until about 4 months after it was issued to its employees. To better communicate its plans and hold the Agency accountable for meeting its goals, we believe the CARES plan should be periodically updated for the public as well as integrated into the Agency's strategic plan.

ODAR was still developing its baseline data at the time of our review. As we have noted in prior reviews on hearings backlog initiatives, sufficient measurement and monitoring is necessary to ensure the current initiatives are achieving the intended results and limited resources have a positive impact on the hearings process. The Agency may be able to learn from earlier measurement and monitoring efforts to improve the CARES plan process.

Recommendations

We made a number of recommendations related to communication, planning, measurement, and monitoring. The Agency agreed with our recommendations.