

Backlog of SSD Hearings Increases

In 2007, the Social Security Administration (SSA) set a plan in motion designed to reduce the backlog of pending disability applications and to eliminate the backlog of hearing requests by 2012. However, a study conducted this year by the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) disputes that this goal is being met.

In 2007, SSA had several key methods planned to reduce the backlog. This included creating a "National Hearing Center" where "a centralized cadre of Administrative Law Judges" (ALJs) would hear cases via video conference.

Hearings were supposed to be sped up by the use of these teleconferences, and Congress funded the cost of 500 ALJs as well as additional administrative workers and overtime for existing employees to handle the processing of applications.

Another key part of the plan was for the ALJs to reach dispositions and close out the cases that had been sitting the longest. In 2007, the focus was on those cases that had been pending for 1,000 days or more. In 2011, that figure had decreased to cases that were over 775 days.

Despite these efforts, and an initial measure of success by a drop in pending applications, Social Security Disability (SSD) appeals have increased over the last year.

When the plan was first set out in early 2007, there were 715,568 cases that were pending hearings. While that number was down in 2010 to 705,367, the TRAC study found that the number of cases pending appeal hearings will be 735,660 for the current fiscal year, meaning there will be more appeals pending now than when the plan was first initiated.

In 2007, applicants waited an average of 512 days for their SSD appeals to be processed; the estimated number of days that applicants will wait in the current fiscal year drops to 369. While this does show an improvement in the wait time for applicants, it does not change the fact that overall, despite money from Congress and the SSA taking steps the last four years to facilitate the faster processing of appeal applications, more applicants are now waiting for their SSD appeals to be processed.