
**OFFICE OF
THE INSPECTOR GENERAL**

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

**IMPLEMENTATION OF
BEST PRACTICES IN
THE OFFICE OF HEARINGS
AND APPEALS OPERATIONS**

August 1999

A-06-97-21007

**EVALUATION
REPORT**



Mission

We improve SSA programs and operations and protect them against fraud, waste, and abuse by conducting independent and objective audits, evaluations, and investigations. We provide timely, useful, and reliable information and advice to Administration officials, the Congress, and the public.

Authority

The Inspector General Act created independent audit and investigative units, called the Office of Inspector General (OIG). The mission of the OIG, as spelled out in the Act, is to:

- Conduct and supervise independent and objective audits and investigations relating to agency programs and operations.**
- Promote economy, effectiveness, and efficiency within the agency.**
- Prevent and detect fraud, waste, and abuse in agency programs and operations.**
- Review and make recommendations regarding existing and proposed legislation and regulations relating to agency programs and operations.**
- Keep the agency head and the Congress fully and currently informed of problems in agency programs and operations.**

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- Independence to determine what reviews to perform.**
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SOCIAL SECURITY

Office of the Inspector General

MEMORANDUM

Date: AUG 24 1999

Refer To:

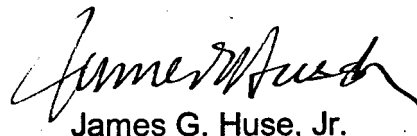
To: John R. Dyer
Principal Deputy Commissioner
of Social Security

Acting Inspector General

Subject: Implementation of Best Practices in the Office of Hearings and Appeals Operations
(A-06-97-21007)

Attached is a copy of our subject final report. The objective of this evaluation was to assess the usefulness of the best practices process implemented for the Office of Hearings and Appeals hearing offices by its Practice and Procedure Exchange.

You may wish to comment on any further action taken or contemplated on our recommendations. If you choose to offer comments, please provide them within the next 60 days. If you wish to discuss the final report, please call me or have your staff contact Daniel R. Devlin, Acting Assistant Inspector General for Audit, at (410) 965-9700.



James G. Huse, Jr.

Attachment

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this evaluation was to assess the usefulness of the best practices process implemented for the Office of Hearings and Appeals (OHA) hearing offices (HO) by its Practice and Procedure Exchange (Exchange).

BACKGROUND

On March 12, 1993, OHA established the Exchange to improve disability processing. The Exchange consists of 11 members which include personnel from HOs, regional offices (RO), and Headquarters. In addition, the Exchange selected regional coordinators to assist HOs with issues related to Exchange releases. The Exchange's mission is to obtain innovative ideas and work processes developed by HOs and share the best practices with HOs to help them perform more efficiently. If the Exchange determines that a practice or procedure is beneficial, the information is distributed to ROs and HOs.

Since June 1993, the Exchange has distributed 24 best practice releases (releases) to ROs and HOs. Although the offices are not required to use them, the Exchange request offices make staff aware of the releases and implement those that may be useful.

We contacted OHA officials at Headquarters and the Dallas RO to obtain background material and copies of the releases sent to the ROs and HOs. We sent questionnaires to the chief administrative law judge at each of the 132 HOs nationwide. The purpose of our survey was to obtain information concerning HOs' use of the releases. We received 130 responses for an overall response rate of 98 percent.

FINDINGS

- MOST HOs REPORTED THE RELEASES WERE USEFUL
- THREE-FOURTHS OF THE HOs GAVE THE EXCHANGE A FAVORABLE RATING
- COMMUNICATION OF EXCHANGE INFORMATION NEEDS IMPROVEMENT
- HOs PROVIDED SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING THE EXCHANGE'S SERVICES

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

OHA's best practices releases issued by the Exchange were viewed by HOs as a valuable means of sharing ideas and implementing improved processes. Some 95 percent of the HOs implementing releases found them useful and only 23 percent of the responders gave the Exchange an unfavorable rating. However, responders reported that distribution and communication problems detracted from the releases' effectiveness. A majority of the offices reported that they did not receive all of the releases. Many of the HOs reported not knowing who to contact to request releases, submit suggestions, or provide feedback. To improve the use of best practices releases, we recommend that OHA:

- Improve communications between the Exchange and HOs. Ensure that all HOs receive copies of the releases and provide periodic updates of the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of Exchange members and coordinators.
- Encourage HOs to implement releases that would benefit office operations.
- Arrange for technical support to implement the practice or procedure when needed.
- Determine, periodically, how well the Exchange is communicating with and providing service to HOs.

AGENCY COMMENTS

In response to our draft report, the Social Security Administration (SSA) agreed with our recommendations. SSA expects to have all four of the recommendations fully implemented by December 31, 1999. (See Appendix D for the full text of the Agency's comments.)

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INTRODUCTION

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this evaluation was to assess the usefulness of the best practices process implemented for the Office of Hearings and Appeals (OHA) hearing offices (HO) by its Practice and Procedure Exchange (Exchange).

BACKGROUND

On March 12, 1993, OHA established the Exchange to improve disability processing. The Exchange consists of 11 members which include: 3 administrative law judges (ALJ); 1 regional management officer (RMO); 1 regional office (RO) attorney; 1 HO supervisory staff attorney; 1 HO manager; 1 word processing center supervisor; the Director of the Office of Policy, Planning and Evaluation; the Director of the Division of Field Liaison; and 1 program analyst from the Office of the Chief ALJ. The Exchange selected regional coordinators to serve as liaisons with HOs.

The Exchange's mission is to obtain innovative ideas and work processes developed by HOs and share the best practices with other offices to help them perform more effectively and efficiently. If the Exchange determines that a practice or procedure is beneficial, it distributes the practice or procedure as a release to ROs and HOs.

Since 1993, the Exchange has distributed 24 releases to ROs and HOs. Although there is no requirement for ROs and HOs to use them, the Exchange requests that ROs and HOs make staff aware of the releases and that HOs implement those that may be useful. The releases have included such topics as a simple computer program for decision writing and forms preparation, instructions for expediting case screening and file preparation, a videotape on note taking at hearings, and guides for reading systems queries. (Appendix A is a list of the 24 releases.)

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

We contacted OHA officials at Headquarters and the Dallas RO to obtain background material and copies of the releases sent to HOs and ROs. We sent a questionnaire to the chief ALJ at each of the 132 HOs nationwide. The questionnaire is shown as Appendix B. The purpose of the questionnaire was to obtain information concerning the offices' use of the General (GEN) and RO releases¹ issued by the Exchange. We received 130 responses for an overall response rate of 98 percent. Some

¹ Releases with the prefix GEN are of general applicability and are directed to regional chief ALJs, RMOs, and HO managers. Releases with the prefix RO are applicable to ROs and are directed to regional chief ALJs and RMOs who then distribute them to the HOs.

questionnaires were returned with incomplete responses; for these, we followed up with telephone calls to complete the forms. We based our findings, conclusions, and recommendations on the responses to the questionnaires.

We conducted our evaluation from October 1997 to June 1998. Our review was conducted in accordance with the ***Quality Standards for Inspections*** issued by the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency.

FINDINGS

MOST HOs REPORTED THE RELEASES WERE USEFUL

There were no mandates requiring HOs to use the releases. Nonetheless, 114 (88 percent) of the 130 HOs that responded reported using 1 or more releases. The remaining 16 HOs did not use any of the releases. They cited the following reasons: (1) they had a similar system which was just as good as or better than the Exchange's (eight HOs); (2) the releases were not suitable for their offices (four HOs); or (3) the chief ALJ decided not to use the releases (three HOs). One HO did not provide a reason.

Of the 114 HOs using the releases, 108 offices (95 percent) reported that some releases helped employees save time, improved office process, and improved quality of work. Only six HOs reported that the releases were not helpful, claiming they were unable to adapt the techniques to their offices. A table to show the numbers of HOs using each release and reporting its usefulness is shown as Appendix C.

The releases used by most HOs were GEN releases 4, 5, 6, and 12, and RO release 1. These HOs reported: (1) GEN releases 4 and 5 and RO release 1 saved time, improved office process, and improved quality of work; (2) GEN release 6 improved office process and quality of work; and (3) GEN release 12 helped save time. The following is an explanation of these releases and a discussion of specific benefits received by HOs using them. The specific benefits were based on comments made by individual respondents to explain their favorable responses to each release.

General Release 4 (Effective Note Taking Video)

This release is used to train hearing reporters (including reporters at remote sites and contract hearing reporters) and clerks on how to take effective notes during the hearing process. As shown in Appendix C, 66 percent of the HOs used this release.

Sixty-one percent of the respondents using GEN 4 reported that the release improved the quality of work for the following reasons.

1. Hearing reporters and note takers are better prepared. Terminology is precise and the notes contain the needed information.
2. Hearing reports are consistent regardless of who takes notes.
3. Written hearing decisions contain complete summaries.

Forty-one percent of the respondents using this release reported that it improved the office process for the following reasons.

1. The note-taking process is systemized and terminology is consistent.
2. Notes are better organized and complete.
3. Information collected during the hearing is consistent, even if done by a contract reporter or an office at a remote site.
4. Note takers are better able to identify key information to assist ALJs and writers in the decision process.
5. It assisted in training note takers.

Thirty-two percent of the users reported that GEN 4 saved time for the following reasons.

1. The amount of time reviewing hearing tapes is reduced, because more reliance can be placed on the notes. It takes less time for ALJs to make decisions because notes are better.
2. Productivity has increased and better use is made of the decision writers' time.
3. The improved notes expedite the hearing process.

General Release 5 (Query Guides)

This release is a series of one-page case control system Query Guides for each type of system query. The guides are used to read records generated from computer queries of OHA, State disability determination agencies, and beneficiary master files. The guides assist the clerks and ALJs by providing a concise reference that explains data contained in the queries.

As shown in Appendix C, 64 percent of the HOs use this release. One HO reported that this is "excellent reference material." Forty-seven percent of the users reported that it improved the work process and cited the following reasons.

1. Staff, including legal assistants and decision writers, are able to interpret the Social Security Administration (SSA) queries. As a result, it eliminates the need to contact SSA district offices and field offices for explanations of SSA client data.
2. Procedures are written concisely on one page. It is a useful tool that can be kept at an individual's desk.
3. It helps with processing and preparing cases for hearings.

Forty percent of the users reported this release improved the quality of work for the following reasons.

1. Better reports are prepared.
2. Legal assistants and report writers are able to identify and include in reports critical information.
3. Accurate case histories are constructed.

Thirty-eight percent of the users reported that GEN 5 saved time for the following reasons.

1. The guides are user friendly. SSA queries are reviewed and analyzed more quickly.
2. The hearing process is expedited because employees are able to quickly obtain needed information.

GEN Release 6 (Case Control System Queries and Training)

This release consists of a series of query guides used for training providing information on the use of the: (1) Detailed Earnings Query; (2) Number Holder Identification; (3) Payment History Update System; (4) Bureau of Disability Insurance Query; (5) Master Beneficiary Record; (6) DDSQ; and (7) Supplemental Security Income.

Forty-five percent of the respondents used this release. Forty-nine percent of the HOs using this release reported that it improved their work process for the following reasons.

1. Assists new employees in learning the job.
2. Helps all staff to better understand the work.
3. Provides means to quickly retrieve commonly required information from queries.
4. Eliminates calls to district offices requesting explanations of data obtained from the Customer Information and Control System.

Forty-nine percent of the HOs reported that the quality of the work improved for the following reasons.

1. Legal assistants and report writers are able to accurately reconstruct case histories.
2. ALJs are provided with more detailed and insightful information on particular case issues.
3. ALJs and decision writers are provided better notes.

RO 1 (Decision Drafting Macros)

This release is a computer program which provides: (1) decision shells for disability applications; (2) specialty macros (simple computer programs) on recurring issues common to decision makers and decision writers; and (3) worksheets and forms which automatically input statistical data (e.g., name and age) directly into the decision itself.

Thirty-nine percent of the HOs implemented this release. Seventy-three percent of those offices reported that it saved time for the following reasons:

1. It produces a computer-generated form containing the data needed and formatted the way it is needed.
2. It eliminates the need to monitor tapes and dictate hearing notes.
3. It reduces the amount of time spent drafting decisions and analyzing information. In the words of one HO, "It helps get cases out."

Forty percent of the users reported that RO 1 improved the quality of the work for the following reasons.

1. HOs are able to send written notification of pre-hearing reviews.
2. More accurate information is provided by writers.

Thirty-three percent of the users reported that it improved the work process for the following reasons.

1. It eliminates recording duplicate information.
2. It provides standard material and language for decisions. Decision writers are able to prepare more decisions.
3. More decisions are completed each month.
4. ALJs prepare fully favorable work sheets quickly and send to typist for completion.

GEN Release 12 (Automated Preparation of Contractor's Invoices and Invoice Log)

This release is a computer program which extracts selected information from the HO Tracking System and produces a completed contractor's invoice. This eliminates the need to manually type invoices with carbon copies; thereby, reducing errors.

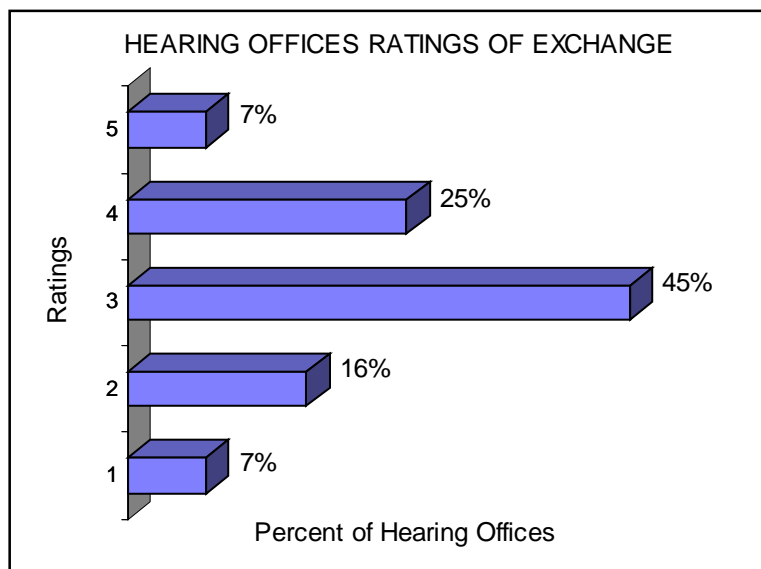
Thirty-six percent of the HOs use this release and 76 percent of those offices reported that this release saved time for the following reasons.

1. It shortens the preparation time for invoices.
2. Clerks type invoices fast and accurately because typing invoices with carbon copies is eliminated.

HOs' RATINGS OF THE EXCHANGE

Using a scale of one to five, with five being the most favorable and one being the least favorable, HOs rated the Exchange services. As shown in Figure 1, some 77 percent rated the Exchange three or higher. One respondent commented, "The idea of an Exchange is excellent. These tools help improve productivity and quality. The concept of sharing knowledge is good." Nevertheless, other HOs complained about not receiving all of the releases and/or the inability to adapt the releases to their particular offices.

Figure 1



COMMUNICATION OF EXCHANGE INFORMATION NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

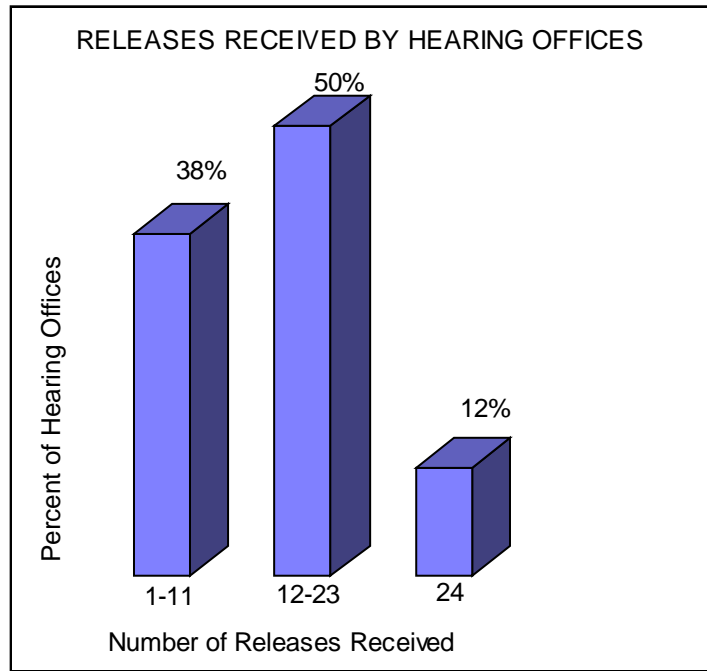
Overall, the HOs rated the Exchange favorably and a significant majority (88 percent) reported using one or more of the releases. However, as discussed below, our survey disclosed that poor communication was a problem.

Most HOs Did Not Receive All of the Releases

Between June 1993 and November 1997 the Exchange reported issuing 20 GEN and 4 RO releases to HOs. However, of the 130 respondents, 115 (88 percent) claimed that they did not receive all of the releases. As shown in Figure 2, some of the HOs

(38 percent) reportedly received less than half of the releases, while only 12 percent acknowledged receipt of all 24 releases. One respondent reported, “I only hear about this at conferences.”

Figure 2



HOs Do Not Know How to Contact Their Exchange Coordinator

Our survey results also disclosed that 35 percent of the respondents did not know how to contact their Exchange coordinator. One respondent reported, “We don’t know the coordinator or how to contact this individual.”

HOs PROVIDED SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING THE EXCHANGE’S SERVICES

Suggestions by HOs for improving the Exchange’s services were grouped into four categories.

1. Distribute releases to all HOs.
2. Improve communication and feedback between HOs and the Exchange. HOs implementing releases should provide feedback and share lessons learned from implementing the releases.
3. Provide incentives/awards for submission of ideas.

4. Ensure HOs have proper equipment to implement what is suggested in the releases. For example, some HOs do not have the capability to take expert testimony by speaker phone.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

OHA's best practices releases issued by the Exchange were favorably viewed by HOs as a valuable means of sharing ideas and implementing improved processes. Some 95 percent of the HOs using releases found them useful and 77 percent of all of the respondents gave an overall favorable rating to the Exchange. However, distribution and communication problems detracted from the Exchange's effectiveness. A majority of the offices reported that they did not receive all of the releases. Many of the HOs reported not knowing who to contact to request releases, submit suggestions, or provide feedback. To improve the use of best practices, we recommend that OHA:

1. Improve communications between the Exchange and HOs. Ensure that all HOs receive copies of the releases and provide periodic updates of the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of Exchange members and coordinators.
2. Encourage HOs to implement releases that would benefit office operations.
3. Arrange for technical support to implement the practice or procedure when needed.
4. Determine, periodically, how well the Exchange is communicating with and providing service to the HOs.

AGENCY COMMENTS

In response to our draft report, SSA agreed with our recommendations. SSA expects to have all four of the recommendations fully implemented by December 31, 1999. (See Appendix D for the full text of the Agency's comments.)

APPENDICES

Office of Hearings and Appeals Practice and Procedure Exchange Releases

Release No.	Subject	Date
General Releases		
GEN 1	Vocational Expert Qualifications and Past Relevant Work Statements	06/21/93
GEN 2	Charlotte Docking Procedures	10/26/93
GEN 3	Hartford Hearing Offices Forms for Rescheduling from the Bench; 1. Salt Lake City's Monthly Report on Cases Awaiting Claim Files and Pending Cases; 2. San Rafael "Batch Day" Procedures.	11/17/93
GEN 4	Effective Note Taking Video	01/27/94
GEN 5	Query Guides	10/20/94
GEN 6	Query Guides for Training	11/08/94
GEN 7	Representative Screening--Request Form and Case Listing	08/10/95
GEN 8	Mobile Congressional Interact Program	08/10/95
GEN 9	Fort Lauderdale "What Happens Next" Letter Office of Hearings and Appeals field office Joint Assistance Pilot	08/23/95
GEN 10	Waiver of Formal Notice of Hearing	08/10/95
GEN 11	Simplified Exhibit Placement Guidelines	08/10/95
GEN 12	Automated Contractor Log	09/07/95
GEN 13	Review of Exhibit File Label	09/07/95
GEN 14	Effective Note Taking Outline	01/07/97
GEN 15	North Carolina Congressional and Community Outreach	05/30/97
GEN 16	Taking Medical Expert Testimony by Speakerphone	10/09/97
GEN 17	Computer Assisted Consultative Examination Request Form	10/09/97

Release No.	Subject	Date
GEN 18	Decision Writing Instructions	10/09/97
GEN 19	Response to Representative Who Has Requested Prehearing Review	10/09/97
GEN 20	Vocational Expert Hypothetical Checklist	11/07/97
<i>Regional Releases</i>		
RO 1	Distribution of E-Mailed Decisional Macros Packet	08/06/93
RO 2	Region I Lotus Monthly Calendar	11/17/93
RO 3	Fee Matter Macros	12/23/93
RO 4	Training Information Center Resources	10/21/94

Questionnaire

Office of the Inspector General
Office of Audit – Dallas, Texas

INSTRUCTIONS

The Office of the Inspector General, Office of Audit is performing a review to assess whether the hearings offices (HOs) at the Social Security Administration Office of Hearings and Appeals (OHA) have implemented best practices to enhance productivity and decision accuracy.

We have asked all HOs at OHA to complete this brief questionnaire. At a later date, we anticipate selecting a sample of offices for more in-depth review. This questionnaire asks about your access, experiences, and use of the general and regional office releases issued by the Practice and Procedure Exchange.

Please answer the questions that are applicable to your office. Some questions have directions printed in **bold letters**. Please be sure to read and follow these directions. Do not confine your explanations to the space allocated on our questionnaire. Use as much space as needed for your answers. The answers you give should be based on **your office** practices and experience with the general and regional office releases. We will not identify any respondents specifically in our report.

If you have any questions about this survey, please call Elsie Chaisson at 214-767-1300 or Sterlin McGruder at 214-767-1321. They will be available to help you.

Please complete the questionnaire electronically and return it by cc:Mail, to Elsie Chaisson at ~S8A-DAL-OI, no later than December 12, 1997.

1. Which of the following General (GEN) and Regional (RO) releases have you received from the Practice and Procedure Exchange Committee?

NOTE: Check all that are applicable.

- GEN 1 Vocational Expert Qualifications and Past Relevant Work Statements
- GEN 2 Charlotte Docketing Procedures
- GEN 3 Hartford Hearing Office Forms for Rescheduling From the Bench; Salt Lake City's Monthly Report on Cases Awaiting Claims Files and Pending Cases; San Rafael "Batch Day" Procedures
- GEN 4 Effective Note Taking Video
- GEN 5 Query Guides
- GEN 6 Query Guides for Training
- GEN 7 Representative Screening Form and Case Listing
- GEN 8 Mobile Congressional Interact Program
- GEN 9 Fort Lauderdale "What Happens Next" Letter-OHA/FO Joint Assistance Pilot
- GEN 10 Waiver of Formal Notice of Hearing
- GEN 11 Simplified Exhibit Placement Guidelines
- GEN 12 Automated Contractor Log
- GEN 13 Review of Exhibit File Label
- GEN 14 Effective Note Taking Online
- GEN 15 North Carolina Congressional and Community Outreach
- GEN 16 Taking Medical Expert Testimony by Speakerphone
- GEN 17 Computer assisted Consultative Examination Request Form
- GEN 18 Decision Writing Instructions
- GEN 19 Response to Representative who has Requested Pre-Hearing Review
- GEN 20 Vocational Experts (VE) Hypothetical Checklist – Action

- RO 1 Decisional Macros
- RO 2 Region I LOTUS Monthly Calendar
- RO 3 Fee Mater Macros
- RO 4 Training Information Center Resources

2. Have you implemented any of the General (GEN) and Regional (RO) releases?

____ Yes

IF YES: Please list by number the releases you use or have tried to use

____ No

IF NO: What are your reasons for not implementing any releases?
(**NOTE: Go to question 7 when finished answering.**)

3. How is your staff informed about the General (GEN) and Regional (RO) releases?

NOTE: Check all that are applicable.

_____ Training

_____ cc: Mail

_____ Memorandums

_____ Staff Meetings

_____ Other, Explain

4. Have the General (GEN) and Regional (RO) releases you implemented assisted in saving staff time, improving the hearing process or improving the quality of the work process.

_____ Yes

_____ No

IF YES: Please provide the GEN or RO number(s) and explain how you were assisted?

GEN/RO Implemented
[Enter Number (s)]

_____ Saves Time, Please explain.

_____ Improves Hearing Office Process, Please explain.

_____ Improves Quality of Work Products, Please explain.

5. Do you know how to contact your local Practices and Procedures Exchange Coordinator?

_____ Yes
_____ No

6. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 is the lowest rating and 5 is the highest), rate the Practice and Procedure Exchange process? **Please circle the appropriate Number.**

1 2 3 4 5

Why did you assign this number?

7. What suggestions do you have for improving the Practices and Procedures Exchange services?

Note: Please provide the identifying information for a contact person (if different from the person completing the questionnaire) and the person completing the questionnaire.

We are requesting the following information so that we may contact you should we have any questions about the information you provide. As noted previously, we will not identify any respondents specifically in our report.

Contact Person

Name _____

Title _____

Phone number _____

Person completing the questionnaire

Name _____

Title _____

Phone number _____

Hearings Offices' Use of General and Regional Office Releases

Release	Hearings Offices' Using Release		Saves Time		Improves Process		Improves Quality	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
GEN 1	23	20	12	52	9	39	8	35
GEN 2	20	17	8	40	12	60	2	10
GEN 3	19	16	11	58	6	32	3	16
GEN 4	75	66	24	32	31	41	46	61
GEN 5	73	64	28	38	34	47	29	40
GEN 6	51	45	12	24	25	49	25	49
GEN 7	17	15	12	71	6	35	6	35
GEN 8	20	17	18	90	6	30	1	5
GEN 9	10	8	4	40	3	30	3	30
GEN 10	22	19	10	45	5	23	3	13
GEN 11	10	8	3	30	3	30	1	10
GEN 12	41	36	31	76	11	27	9	22
GEN 13	11	9	5	45	9	82	2	18
GEN 14	21	18	3	14	8	38	11	52
GEN 15	8	7	3	38	4	50	3	38
GEN 16	35	31	9	26	11	31	5	14
GEN 17	21	18	16	76	4	19	5	24
GEN 18	28	25	10	36	5	18	14	50
GEN 19	8	7	4	50	3	38	3	38
GEN 20	21	18	10	48	9	43	5	24
RO 1	45	39	33	73	15	33	18	40
RO 2	11	9	4	36	4	36	1	9
RO 3	9	8	4	44	1	11	0	0
RO 4	15	13	3	20	6	40	4	27

SSA'S COMMENTS



SOCIAL SECURITY

MEMORANDUM

Date: July 28, 1999

Refer To:

To:

Mr. James G. Huse, Jr.
Acting Inspector General

From:

Mr. John R. Dyer
Principal Deputy Commissioner

Subject: Office of the Inspector General Draft Report, "Implementation of Best Practices in the Office of Hearings and Appeals" (A-06-97-21007)--INFORMATION

Our comments on the subject report are attached. Staff questions may be directed to Odessa J. Woods on extension 50378.

Attachment:
SSA Comments

COMMENTS ON THE OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL (OIG) DRAFT REPORT, "IMPLEMENTATION OF BEST PRACTICES IN THE OFFICE OF HEARINGS AND APPEALS OPERATIONS" (A-06-97-21007)

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft report which evaluates the usefulness of the best practices process implemented for the Office of Hearings and Appeals (OHA) hearings offices (HO) by its Practice and Procedure Exchange (the Exchange). We expect to have all of the recommendations that are outlined in the subject report fully implemented by December 31, 1999. Our comments to each specific recommendation are below.

OIG RECOMMENDATION

Improve communications between the Exchange and HOs. Ensure that all HOs receive copies of the releases and provide periodic updates of the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of Exchange members and coordinators

SSA COMMENT

We concur. Efforts are underway to convert the viable prior Exchange releases to Microsoft WORD format and post these on OHA's Intranet web page. This will provide ready access to the Exchange releases by every employee in every hearing office.

OIG RECOMMENDATION

Encourage HOs to implement releases that would benefit office operations.

SSA COMMENT

We concur. HOs will be encouraged to implement appropriate practices or procedures identified by the Exchange. Periodic reminder memoranda will be issued by the Office of the Chief Administrative Law Judge.

OIG RECOMMENDATION

Arrange for technical support to implement the practice or procedure when needed.

SSA COMMENT

We concur. When HOs identify practices or procedures they think would be beneficial in their offices, efforts will be made to provide the technical support needed.

OIG RECOMMENDATION

Determine periodically how well the Exchange is communicating with and providing service to the HOs.

SSA COMMENT

We concur. The next meeting of the Exchange will provide an opportunity to discuss OIG's report findings and explore further communication vehicles such as the Social Security Intranet pages. Thereafter, on an annual basis, the Exchange will conduct an evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses in communicating with and providing service to the HOs.

MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS REPORT

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Chairman, Committee on Ways and Means	1
Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Ways and Means	1
Chief of Staff, Committee on Ways and Means	1
Chairman, Subcommittee on Social Security	2
Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on Social Security	1
Majority Staff Director, Subcommittee on Social Security	2
Minority Staff Director, Subcommittee on Social Security	2
Chairman, Subcommittee on Human Resources	1
Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on Human Resources	
Chairman, Committee on Budget, House of Representatives	
Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Budget, House of Representatives	
Chairman, Committee on Government Reform and Oversight	
Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Government Reform and Oversight	
Chairman, Committee on Governmental Affairs	
Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Governmental Affairs	

Chairman, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives	1
Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives	1
Chairman, Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives	1
Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives	1
Chairman, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Senate	1
Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Senate	1
Chairman, Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Senate	1
Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Senate	1
Chairman, Committee on Finance	1
Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Finance	1
Chairman, Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy	1
Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy	1
Chairman, Senate Special Committee on Aging	1
Ranking Minority Member, Senate Special Committee on Aging	1
Vice Chairman, Subcommittee on Government Management Information and Technology	1
President, National Council of Social Security Management Associations, Incorporated	1
Treasurer, National Council of Social Security Management Associations, Incorporated	1
Social Security Advisory Board	1
AFGE General Committee	9
President, Federal Managers Association	1
Regional Public Affairs Officer	1
Total	97

Overview of the Office of the Inspector General

Office of Audit

The Office of Audit (OA) conducts comprehensive financial and performance audits of the Social Security Administration's (SSA) programs and makes recommendations to ensure that program objectives are achieved effectively and efficiently. Financial audits, required by the Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990, assess whether SSA's financial statements fairly present the Agency's financial position, results of operations, and cash flow. Performance audits review the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of SSA's programs. OA also conducts short-term management and program evaluations focused on issues of concern to SSA, Congress, and the general public. Evaluations often focus on identifying and recommending ways to prevent and minimize program fraud and inefficiency.

Office of Executive Operations

The Office of Executive Operations (OEO) supports the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) by providing information resource management; systems security; and the coordination of budget, procurement, telecommunications, facilities and equipment, and human resources. In addition, this office is the focal point for the OIG's strategic planning function and the development and implementation of performance measures required by the Government Performance and Results Act. OEO is also responsible for performing internal reviews to ensure that OIG offices nationwide hold themselves to the same rigorous standards that we expect from the Agency, as well as conducting employee investigations within OIG. Finally, OEO administers OIG's public affairs, media, and interagency activities and also communicates OIG's planned and current activities and their results to the Commissioner and Congress.

Office of Investigations

The Office of Investigations (OI) conducts and coordinates investigative activity related to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement of SSA programs and operations. This includes wrongdoing by applicants, beneficiaries, contractors, physicians, interpreters, representative payees, third parties, and by SSA employees in the performance of their duties. OI also conducts joint investigations with other Federal, State, and local law enforcement agencies.

Counsel to the Inspector General

The Counsel to the Inspector General provides legal advice and counsel to the Inspector General on various matters, including: 1) statutes, regulations, legislation, and policy directives governing the administration of SSA's programs; 2) investigative procedures and techniques; and 3) legal implications and conclusions to be drawn from audit and investigative material produced by the OIG. The Counsel's office also administers the civil monetary penalty program.