



# News Release

SOCIAL SECURITY

## **Social Security Continues to Make Progress Expediting Backlogged Disability Cases**

### **Limited Resources Under a Continuing Resolution Could Slow Momentum in FY 2009**

During a speech to the National Organization of Social Security Claimants' Representatives, Michael J. Astrue, Commissioner of Social Security, reported on the progress made in fiscal year (FY) 2008 in the agency's efforts to expedite backlogged disability cases.

"The plan we presented to Congress in May 2007 is working," Commissioner Astrue said. "We have moved quickly to utilize new technologies, improve our business processes and add new staff. Combined with the hard work of our employees and the support of Congress, we are clearly on the right track to providing Americans with disabilities the prompt service they deserve."

During FY 2008, Social Security hired 190 new Administrative Law Judges (ALJs), opened a National Hearing Center (NHC), eliminated virtually its entire aged case backlog of more than 135,000 cases waiting over 900 days for a hearing decision, and implemented a quick disability determination (QDD) process in all 50 states.

As a result of these and many other activities, the disability backlog at the hearings level, which had been growing at the rate of about 70,000 cases each year for most of this decade, grew by only about 14,000 cases.

"The hiring of 190 additional ALJs was critical but will not yield immediate results," Commissioner Astrue noted. It generally takes about nine months for new ALJs to become fully productive. With attrition and experienced ALJs being used to train the new judges, the agency actually had 46 fewer ALJs available in FY 2008 than the prior year. Despite this fact, ALJs held more hearings and issued more dispositions than in FY 2007. The agency exceeded its targeted goal by over 16,000 cases.

The opening of the NHC gives Social Security the capability to quickly and flexibly move cases and conduct video hearings in the cities with the worst backlogs. NHC judges initially focused their efforts on the backlogs in Atlanta, Cleveland, and Detroit – cities where claimants had been

waiting the longest. Atlanta continues to be a focus for the NHC, along with Flint, MI and Indianapolis. The agency plans to expand the NHC in Falls Church, VA as well as open additional centers in Albuquerque and Chicago. In addition, the agency is working with the General Services Administration to establish new hearing offices in the most backlogged states: Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Michigan and Ohio.

Social Security completed the nationwide roll-out of the QDD process in February 2008 and it has proven to be an unqualified success. QDD cases now represent about three percent of all new claims. This means more than 75,000 people each year will have their cases allowed in about 8 days, something that was unheard of just a year ago. The QDD threshold has now been adjusted for 31 Disability Determination Services (DDS), and the agency plans to gradually increase the volume of QDD cases while maintaining the same level of quality.

Other accomplishments in FY 2008 include:

- More than 2.6 million initial disability claims processed;
- Approximately 560,000 reconsideration cases processed;
- Over 575,000 hearing requests processed;
- Over 83,000 Appeals Council Reviews processed;
- Implemented procedures to allow attorney adjudicators to issue fully-favorable decisions -- over 24,000 decisions issued;
- Implemented a process in which the hearing office returns specific cases to the DDS for review for potential allowance -- to date, DDSs have allowed about 24,000 cases;
- Improved the process to identify and expedite military casualty claims;
- Implemented the Request for Program Consultation process nationally to improve accuracy and consistency in the disability decision-making process; and
- Implemented a process that allows the public and third parties to file disability reconsideration and hearing requests via the Internet.

“The progress we have made is significant, especially since receipts at the hearings level were five percent higher than we expected in FY 2008. While the backlog grew slightly, the rate of increase in pending cases continues to drop,” Commissioner Astrue said.

Looking ahead to FY 2009, Commissioner Astrue hopes the energy and talent of the new ALJs, the national rollout of Compassionate Allowances, and other initiatives will improve the quality of reviews and steadily reduce the number of pending cases starting this spring. However, he stated, “the effects of an extended continuing resolution are clearly slowing our progress. We simply cannot address the challenges we face without adequate and timely funding. Many things we need to do, such as increase support staff and add new hearing offices, will not happen if Congress fails to pass an adequate appropriations bill by March. Social Security is an agency of great skill and accomplishment and we are ready to work with Congress, the new Administration and all of our stakeholders to improve service to the public.”

###