

STRATEGIC GOAL 1

ELIMINATE OUR HEARINGS BACKLOG AND PREVENT ITS RECURRENCE

Long-Term Outcomes:

- Reduce the number of pending hearings to 466,000 by Fiscal Year (FY) 2013;
- Reduce the time it takes an individual to receive a hearing decision to an average of 270 days;
- Increase productivity by automating labor-intensive tasks necessary to issue a hearing decision; and
- Establish standardized electronic hearings business processes.

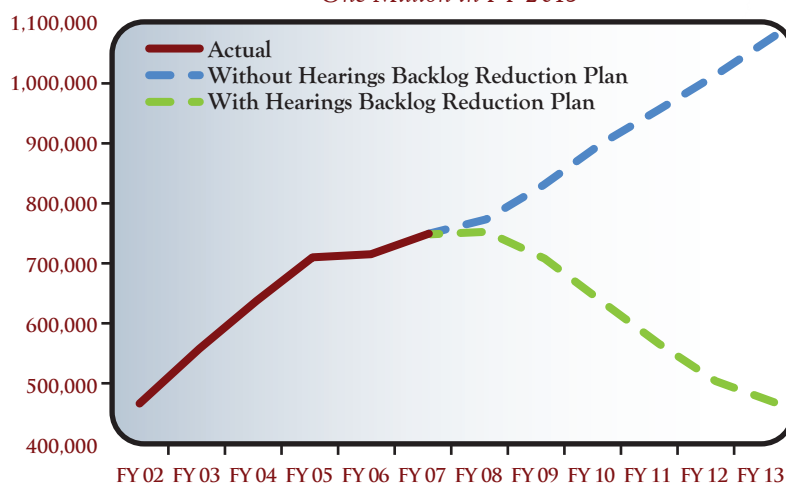
Issues:

For more than half a century, we have helped disabled workers and their families cope with the loss of income caused by severe disability. Unfortunately, many of today's applicants for disability benefits face an uphill battle to get a hearing before an administrative law judge (ALJ). For some, the long wait for a hearing leads to homelessness and the loss of family and friends. Tragically, individuals have died waiting for a hearing. The American people deserve better from their government.

Today, over 750,000 individuals are waiting for a hearing on their disability applications. Despite progress in the past year, on average an individual waits over 500 days to receive a decision. The backlog growth we have seen in this decade has resulted primarily from an environment of limited resources, combined with an increased demand for services as baby boomers reach their most disability-prone years. We were also slow to embrace the new technologies necessary to manage the largest social insurance system in the world. Eliminating the hearings backlog is a moral imperative and our highest priority.

We have taken a number of important steps to manage this workload better. In 2007, we implemented a major change in our business process which involved transitioning from paper

Without the Hearings Backlog Reduction Plan, Disability Hearings Pending Would Have Exceeded One Million in FY 2013



to electronic disability folders. We also developed and began implementing the *Hearings Backlog Reduction Plan*. A more detailed description of the plan is available at http://www.socialsecurity.gov/legislation/testimony_052307_addendum.htm. If fully funded, this plan will eliminate the backlog no later than FY 2013 and reduce the number of pending hearings to 466,000. This pending level ensures a sufficient “pipeline” of cases to maximize the efficiency of our hearings process and achieves an average processing time of 270 days. To accomplish this goal, we will focus on the following objectives:

Objective 1: Increase our capacity to hear and decide cases

To eliminate our hearings backlog, we must employ new and innovative strategies to increase our capacity to hear and decide cases:

- **Increase the number of ALJs and support staff at the hearing level:** Hiring additional ALJs is essential to the success of our *Hearings Backlog Reduction Plan*. We are increasing the size of our ALJ cadre to 1,250 by FY 2010, an increase of 15 percent from our FY 2007 low of 1,082 ALJs. We also, for the first time, have established individual annual expectations for ALJs, asking each ALJ to issue 500 to 700 hearing decisions each year. Additionally, we are working to eliminate significant caseload disparities between hearing offices and adding new hearing offices in locations where we cannot efficiently handle the pending caseload through other means.
- **Screen hearing requests to quickly identify possible allowances:** We will continue to refine computer models to screen and triage hearing requests to identify cases where we can issue a fully favorable decision without a hearing. In addition, to augment our decision-making capacity, non-ALJ decision-makers will screen pending hearing requests to determine if they can issue fully favorable decisions based on the evidence already in the file. This process conserves ALJ resources for the more complex cases requiring a hearing.
- **Increase the use of video hearings:** Video hearing technology will minimize travel to hearing sites for individuals, their representatives, and ALJs. In remote areas, this secure technology enables individuals to attend a video hearing rather than travel long distances to a hearing site. Additionally, video hearings allow ALJs to be more productive by providing them more time to hold hearings and issue decisions. We will increase the use of video hearing technology across the Nation.

We will also conduct a pilot to test the feasibility of individuals participating in video hearings from their representatives’ office. This pilot should offer convenience and comfort to many individuals who have a hearing pending, save time for their representatives, and reduce costs associated with maintaining hearing office space.



- **Open National Hearing Centers:** In early 2008, we opened our first fully electronic National Hearing Center in Falls Church, VA. The National Hearing Center concept allows us to capitalize on new technologies, such as electronic disability folders and video hearings. It also gives us flexibility in addressing our hearings backlog and swiftly targeting assistance to heavily backlogged areas across the country. We will open new National Hearing Centers in Albuquerque and Chicago.

The Urgency for Change in the Hearings Process

“I filed for Social Security back in October 2005. I still have not heard from Social Security regarding a hearing date. I am very sick and if I don’t get some help soon I am going to be dead before I get the chance to get in front of a judge. Please. My life depends on it.”

Letter from an individual who had been waiting 900 days for a hearing.

Our commitment to better management of the hearings process has already seen positive results. Our greatest accomplishment thus far has been issuing decisions on cases that have been pending for the longest period of time. We accomplished our FY 2007 goal of issuing decisions on 64,000 cases that were pending over 1,000 days. Continuing and building on our successful strategies, our goal in FY 2008 is to issue decisions on all 135,000 cases pending over 900 days. We will target cases over 850 days in FY 2009. We must issue decisions on the oldest cases. It is wrong to let individuals wait unacceptable lengths of time for a hearing decision. The American people deserve better from their government.

Objective 2: Improve our workload management practices throughout the hearings process

We must revisit the way we perform work in hearing offices by establishing best demonstrated practices, increasing automation, and testing a variety of models to determine the most efficient methods of doing our work. Our transition from paper to electronic disability folders allows us to further automate and standardize our hearings processes. We will use the following strategies to achieve this objective:

- **Streamline and automate case tasks:** One impediment to a timely hearing is the lengthy process used to prepare a case for an ALJ. We will introduce a number of electronic initiatives to reduce this case preparation time. We will pilot software with the potential to significantly decrease the time it takes staff to prepare and exhibit files, associate correspondence, prepare and send notices, schedule hearings, and transfer workloads. We will also implement centralized printing and mailing of notices to streamline the processing of the millions of notices hearing offices send annually.

- **Eliminate use of temporary hearing sites:** Currently we use a variety of sites to hold hearings, including temporary space in hotels, motels, courthouses, schools, and conference centers. Holding hearings in temporary sites is difficult, especially with electronic disability folders. Also, security in temporary space is difficult and expensive to provide. As quickly as we can, given the many constraints involved in acquiring and retrofitting space, we will eliminate use of temporary hearing sites and replace them with video hearing rooms in field offices and other Social Security facilities. This change will allow us to operate more efficiently, and provide individuals with a more convenient, secure, and dignified environment for their hearing.
- **Establish standardized electronic hearings business processes:** In every hearing office, we will implement standardized business processes that seamlessly integrate the most advanced information technology support for issuing hearing decisions. Standardized business processes will ensure we handle requests for hearings consistently within each office, reduce operating expenses, incorporate future technological advancements, reduce the time individuals wait to receive hearing decisions, improve the timeliness of our case-related activities, ensure the legal sufficiency of our decisions, and help us determine the ideal ratio of staff needed to support an ALJ in an electronic environment. In addition, we will continually revisit and revise our hearings business processes to make them as efficient as possible.
- **Prevent unintended backlogs:** Our administrative appeals process provides individuals the right to request an Appeals Council review of their hearing decision. We acknowledge that our efforts to eliminate the hearings backlog will result in increased Appeals Council receipts. We will closely monitor the Appeals Council workload and take necessary actions to prevent backlogs at that level and reduce the amount of time it takes to receive an Appeals Council decision.

