



Highlights of [GAO-03-984T](#), testimony before the Subcommittee on Social Security, Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives

# ELECTRONIC DISABILITY CLAIMS PROCESSING

## Social Security Administration's Accelerated Strategy Faces Significant Risks

### Why GAO Did This Study

Providing benefits to disabled individuals is one of the Social Security Administration's most important service delivery obligations—touching the lives of about 10 million individuals. In recent years, however, providing this benefit in a timely and efficient manner has become an increasing challenge for the agency. This past January, in fact, GAO designated SSA's disability programs as high-risk.

Following a prior unsuccessful attempt, the agency is now in the midst of a major initiative to automate its disability claims functions, taking advantage of technology to improve this service. Seeking immediate program improvements, SSA is using an accelerated approach—called AeDib—to develop an electronic disability claims processing system.

At the request of the Subcommittee, GAO is currently assessing the strategy that underlies SSA's latest initiative to develop the electronic disability system. For this testimony, GAO was asked to discuss its key observations to date regarding the AeDib initiative, including strategy, risks, and stakeholder involvement.

GAO plans to discuss more fully the results of this continuing review in a subsequent report.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-984T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-984T).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Linda Koontz at (202) 512-6240 or [koontzl@gao.gov](mailto:koontzl@gao.gov).

### What GAO Found

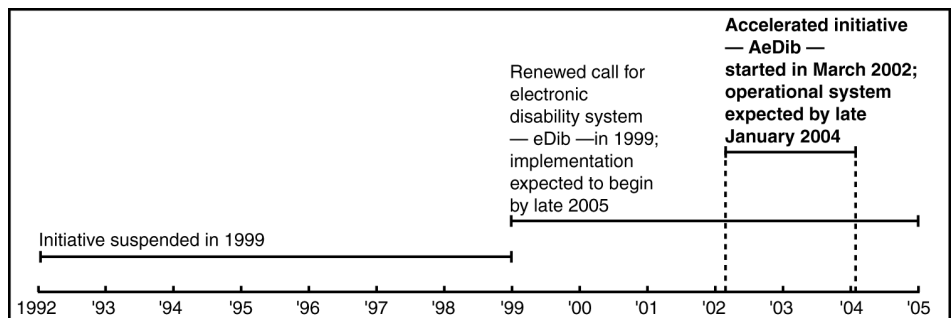
SSA's goal to establish a more efficient, paperless disability claims processing system is important, and one that could benefit millions. To achieve this goal, SSA's immediate focus is on developing an electronic folder to store claimant information and large volumes of medical images, files, and other documents that are currently maintained in paper folders, and then make this information accessible to all entities involved in disability determinations. SSA's accelerated strategy calls for development of this capability by January 2004 rather than in 2005, as originally planned. (See figure.)

Since accelerating this effort, SSA has performed important tasks toward establishing this initial electronic capability. Nonetheless, it has substantial work to accomplish in order to develop the technologically complex electronic folder and begin implementation by late next January.

While responsive to the agency's need for an operational system as soon as possible, SSA's accelerated strategy involves risks. For example, pilot tests that are to provide important information about the electronic folder's performance are not expected until late December—just 1 month before its planned implementation. In addition, a strategy for end-to-end testing to demonstrate that the individual components will work together reliably has not been completed. Further increasing the system's vulnerability is that SSA has not yet comprehensively assessed project risks. Unless addressed, these factors could ultimately derail the initiative.

While SSA has taken steps to involve key stakeholders in the systems development process, officials in state Disability Determination Services offices that we contacted expressed concerns that they had only limited involvement in the development effort. They stated that their concerns were not adequately heard and considered in the decision-making process. Unless SSA addresses these issues, it cannot be assured of stakeholder agreement with and full use of the system.

History of SSA's Efforts to Achieve an Electronic Disability Claims Processing System



Source: GAO.