



Highlights of [GAO-04-121](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Social Security, Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

SSA oversees and fully funds primarily state-operated DDSs that determine whether applicants are eligible for disability benefits. The disability examiners employed by the DDSs play a key role in determining benefit eligibility. This report examines (1) the challenges the DDSs face today in retaining and recruiting examiners and enhancing their expertise; (2) the extent to which the DDSs engage in workforce planning and encounter obstacles in doing so; and (3) the extent to which SSA is addressing present and future human capital challenges in the DDSs.

## What GAO Recommends

While acknowledging the difficulties SSA faces in addressing DDS human capital issues within the federal-state context, GAO recommends that SSA improve its workforce planning by:

- Developing a nationwide strategic workforce plan that addresses present and future DDS human capital challenges;
- Establishing uniform minimum qualifications for examiners; and
- Working with DDSs to close gaps between current and required examiner skills.

In its comments, SSA generally agreed with our recommendations' intent but said that we did not fairly or adequately address the many sides of DDS human capital management issues. We continue to believe that the report is fair and balanced and that our scope and methods allowed us to adequately address these issues.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-121](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-121).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robert E. Robertson at (202) 512-7215 or [Robertsonr@gao.gov](mailto:Robertsonr@gao.gov).

# SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

## Strategic Workforce Planning Needed to Address Human Capital Challenges Facing the Disability Determination Services

### What GAO Found

GAO found—through its survey of 52 of the 54 Disability Determination Service (DDS) directors and interviews with SSA officials and DDS staff—that the DDSs face three key challenges in retaining examiners and enhancing their expertise:

**High turnover:** Over half of all DDS directors surveyed said that examiner turnover was too high in their offices. We found that examiner turnover was about twice that of federal employees performing similar work. Nearly two-thirds of all directors reported that turnover has increased SSA's hiring and training costs and claims-processing times. And two-thirds of all directors cited stressful workloads and noncompetitive salaries as major factors that contributed to turnover.

**Recruiting and hiring difficulties:** More than three-quarters of all DDS directors said they had difficulties over a three-year period in recruiting and hiring examiners. Of these, more than three-quarters said these difficulties contributed to increases in claims-processing times, examiner caseload levels, backlogs, and turnover. More than half of all directors reported that state-imposed compensation limits contributed to hiring difficulties.

**Gaps in key skills:** Nearly one-half of all DDS directors said that at least a quarter of their examiners needed additional training in areas critical to disability decision-making. Over half of all directors cited factors related to high workload levels as obstacles to examiners' receiving additional training.

Despite the workforce challenges facing them, a majority of DDSs do not conduct long-term, comprehensive workforce planning. In prior reports, GAO found that such planning should include key strategies for recruiting, retaining, training, and otherwise developing a workforce capable of meeting long-term agency goals. However, of the DDSs that engage in longer-term workforce planning, a majority have plans that lack such key workforce planning strategies. Directors cited numerous obstacles to long-term workforce planning, such as lengthy state processes to approve DDS human capital changes.

SSA's workforce efforts have not sufficiently addressed current and future DDS human capital challenges. Federal law requires agencies to include in their annual performance plans a description of the human capital strategies needed to meet their strategic goals. However, GAO's review of key SSA planning documents shows they do not include a strategic human capital plan that addresses current and future DDS human capital needs. Thus, SSA does not link its strategic objectives to a workforce plan that covers the very people who are essential to accomplishing those objectives. GAO also found that SSA has not provided human capital assistance in a consistent manner across the DDSs and that SSA's effectiveness in helping the DDSs negotiate human capital changes with the states can be limited by such factors as state budget problems and personnel rules. Finally, SSA has not used its authority to establish uniform human capital standards, such as minimum qualifications for examiners, which would address, on a nationwide basis, some of the DDS challenges.