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# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-07-8](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Finance, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Social Security Act requires that the Social Security Administration (SSA) find an improvement in a beneficiary's medical condition in order to remove him or her from either the Disability Insurance (DI) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs. GAO was asked to (1) examine the proportion of beneficiaries who have improved medically and (2) determine if factors associated with the standard pose challenges for SSA when determining whether beneficiaries continue to be eligible for benefits. To answer these questions, GAO surveyed all 55 Disability Determination Services (DDS) directors, interviewed SSA officials, and reviewed pertinent SSA data.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making a recommendation to SSA to clarify guidance regarding the degree of medical improvement required to meet the standard, the use of exceptions, and the presumption of disability for assessing medical improvement when conducting CDRs.

While generally agreeing with the value of additional guidance, SSA expressed reservations about the need for further guidance on the exceptions. GAO continues to see such a need since 7 of the 11 disability examiners we spoke with were uncertain regarding when to apply the exceptions.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-8](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-8).

To view the full product, click on the link above. To view results of GAO's survey of DDS directors, click: [www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?rptno=GAO-07-4sp](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?rptno=GAO-07-4sp). For more information, contact Robert E. Robertson (202) 512-7215 or [robertsonr@gao.gov](mailto:robertsonr@gao.gov).

# SOCIAL SECURITY DISABILITY PROGRAMS

## Clearer Guidance Could Help SSA Apply the Medical Improvement Standard More Consistently

### What GAO Found

Each year, about 13,800 beneficiaries, or 1.4 percent of all the people who left the disability programs between fiscal years 1999 and 2005, did so because SSA found that they had improved medically. More beneficiaries leave because they convert to regular retirement benefits, die, or for other reasons—including having earnings above program limits. In addition, while continuing disability reviews (CDR) are SSA's most comprehensive tool for determining whether a recipient continues to have a disability, on average, 2.8 percent of beneficiaries were found to have improved medically and to be able to work following a CDR during this 7-year period.

Several factors associated with the medical improvement standard (the standard) pose challenges for SSA when assessing whether beneficiaries continue to be eligible for benefits. First, limitations in SSA guidance may result in inconsistent application of the standard. For example, SSA does not clearly define the degree of improvement needed to meet the standard, and the DDS directors GAO surveyed reported that they use different thresholds to assess if medical improvement has occurred. Second, contrary to existing policy, disability examiners in a majority of the DDSs are incorrectly conducting CDRs with the presumption that a beneficiary has a disability rather than with a "neutral" perspective. Other challenges associated with the standard include inadequate documentation of evidence as well as the judgmental nature of medical improvement determinations. All these factors have implications for the consistency of CDR decisions. However, due to data limitations, GAO was unable to determine the extent to which these problems affect decisions to continue or discontinue benefits.

**Average Percentage of All Beneficiaries Who Were Removed from the DI and SSI Programs by Category (Fiscal Years 1999 to 2005)**

