



Highlights of [GAO-04-552T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on the Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce and the District of Columbia, Committee on Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

Delivering high-quality service to the public in the form of fair, timely, and consistent eligibility decisions for disability benefits is one of SSA's most pressing challenges. This testimony discusses (1) the difficulties SSA faces managing disability claims processing; (2) the outmoded concepts of SSA's disability program; and (3) the Commissioner's strategy for improving the disability process and the challenges it faces.

## What GAO Recommends

This testimony, which is based on prior GAO reports and testimonies, does not contain recommendations. However, these previously-issued products contained a number of recommendations to SSA aimed at addressing concerns about (1) implementation of the electronic disability folder and the automated case processing systems and (2) human capital challenges such as high turnover, recruiting difficulties, and gaps in key knowledge and skills among disability examiners.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-552T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-552T).

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

# SOCIAL SECURITY DISABILITY

## Commissioner Proposes Strategy to Improve the Claims Process, But Faces Implementation Challenges

### What GAO Found

SSA is at a crossroads in its efforts to improve and reorient its disability determination process. Although SSA has made some gains in the short term in improving the timeliness of its decisions, we found that:

- SSA's disability decisions continue to take a long time to process. Despite some recent progress in improving the timeliness of disability decision-making, individuals who initially are denied disability benefits and who appeal still have to wait almost an additional year before a final hearing decision is made. In addition, evidence suggests that inconsistencies continue to exist between decisions made at the initial level and those made at the hearings level.
- SSA's disability programs are grounded in an outdated concept of disability that has not kept up with medical advances and economic and social changes that have redefined the relationship between impairment and the ability to work. Furthermore, employment assistance that could allow claimants to stay in the workforce or return to work—and thus to potentially remain off the disability rolls—is not offered through DI or SSI until after a claimant has gone through a lengthy determination process and has proven his or her inability to work.
- The Commissioner has developed a strategy to improve the disability determination process, including the timeliness and consistency of decisions. While this strategy appears promising, we believe that several key challenges have the potential to hinder its progress, including risks to successfully implementing a new electronic disability folder and automated case processing systems; human capital problems, such as high turnover, recruiting difficulties, and gaps in key knowledge and skills among disability examiners; and an expected dramatic growth in workload.