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# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-08-40](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

For years, the Social Security Administration (SSA) has experienced processing delays and significant backlogs of disability claims. At the end of fiscal year 2006, some 1.5 million disability claims were awaiting a decision. About 576,000 of these claims were backlogged—exceeding the number of claims that should optimally be pending at year-end. In response to the congressional request, GAO (1) examined trends in disability claims backlogs and the time required for SSA to decide a claim, (2) identified key factors contributing to the backlogs and processing times, and (3) described the steps SSA is taking to reduce them.

To address these issues, GAO analyzed SSA administrative data, conducted an extensive literature review, interviewed SSA officials as well as key program personnel, and conducted site visits in three SSA regions.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that SSA monitor the reconsideration stage for backlogs and better plan, execute, and evaluate initiatives to address backlogs.

SSA agreed in part or with the intent of GAO's recommendations, but did not fully agree with some of GAO's conclusions. SSA believed GAO did not sufficiently emphasize the agency's funding needs. GAO added data on SSA funding levels, but continues to believe that the recommendations are valid.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-40](#). For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or [bertonid@gao.gov](mailto:bertonid@gao.gov).

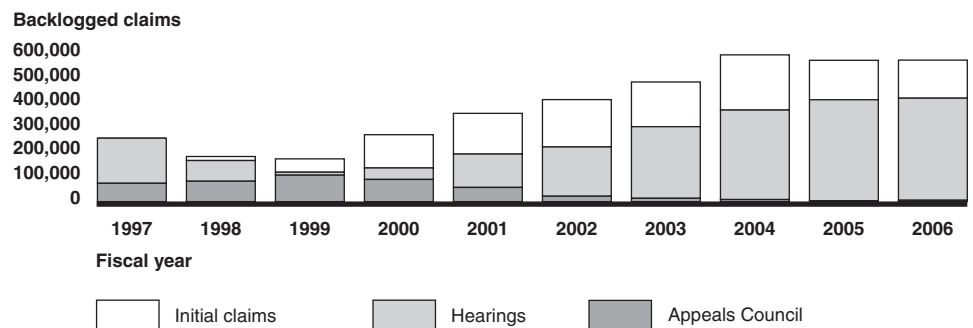
# SOCIAL SECURITY DISABILITY

## Better Planning, Management, and Evaluation Could Help Address Backlogs

### What GAO Found

From fiscal year 1997 through 2006, backlogged disability claims in the Social Security Administration's processing system doubled, reaching about 576,000 cases. Backlogs of varying degrees have occurred at most stages of the claims process. The only significant decline occurred at the last stage—the Appeals Council—where fewer cases are processed. At the initial claims level, handled by state Disability Determination Services (DDS), a backlog developed in fiscal year 1998 and grew to about 155,000 claims in fiscal year 2006. At the hearings level, backlogged claims exceeded 415,000 that year and accounted for 72 percent of the total backlog. Insufficient data prevented GAO from identifying trends in backlogs at the reconsideration stage. Processing times, meanwhile, increased with claimants generally waiting significantly longer—for example, an additional 95 days at the hearings level—for a decision.

**Total Backlogged Claims, by Level of Adjudication, Fiscal Years 1997 to 2006.**



Source: GAO analysis of SSA data.

Substantial growth in the numbers of disability claims, staff losses and turnover, and management weaknesses have contributed to the backlog problem. Initial applications for benefits grew more than 20 percent over the period while SSA experienced losses in key personnel: claims examiners in the state determination offices and administrative law judges and support staff in the hearings offices. In addition, management weaknesses evidenced in a number of initiatives to address the backlogs have failed to remedy and sometimes contributed to the problem.

In 2006, SSA introduced the Disability Service Improvement initiative (DSI), but suspended national rollout of it in order to concentrate on the hearings backlog and full implementation of SSA's electronic case-processing system. DSI is still underway in the Boston region; though hampered by rushed implementation, poor communication, and a lack of financial planning, DSI has shown mixed results, and SSA has proposed discontinuing certain components because of cost. Thorough evaluations that could help inform decisions about DSI's future have not yet been conducted.