PERFORMANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY SERIES

Social Security Administration

Why GAO Did This Report

In its 2001 performance and accountability report on the Social Security Administration (SSA), GAO identified important issues relating to research capacity, its process for determining disability, management of a high-risk Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, future service delivery plans, and protection of information facing the agency. The information GAO presents in this report is intended to help to sustain congressional attention and an agency focus on continuing to make progress in addressing these challenges and ultimately overcoming them. This report is part of a special series of reports on governmentwide and agency-specific issues.

What Remains to Be Done

GAO believes that SSA should

- sustain and expand the range of SSI program integrity initiatives underway,

- develop a long-term strategy for improving timeliness of claims processing and consistency in decisionmaking,

- develop a comprehensive return-to-work strategy for individuals with disabilities, and

- develop a concrete service delivery plan.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-117.

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What GAO Found

SSA has made progress in addressing problems with the integrity of the SSI program and in playing a more active role in research, evaluation, and policy development. Nevertheless, because of ongoing concerns about the positioning of SSA's disability programs to provide meaningful and timely support to Americans with disabilities, GAO has added modernizing federal disability programs to the 2003 high-risk list. In addition, the agency is continuing to face management challenges and needs to:

- **Continue to strengthen the integrity of the SSI program.** SSA's progress in developing new tools to improve SSI's financial integrity and management warrants removing the program's high-risk designation. However, the agency must completely implement the reforms it has undertaken and identify and move forward with options to simplify the program's complex policies.

- **Improve SSA's programs that provide support for individuals with disabilities.** Improving these programs will require updating disability criteria to reflect advances in medicine and technology, and changes in the workforce and developing a comprehensive return-to-work strategy. Further, after years of efforts to redesign its disability claims process, applicants still face a time-consuming process. However, the agency's new Commissioner has made its improvement a priority and has implemented several short-term initiatives to speed up the processing of disability claims on appeal.

- **Better position SSA for future service delivery challenges.** SSA has conducted extensive analyses of future staff retirements, but it has made decisions about succession planning and allowed early retirements without a concrete service delivery plan to detail how and where it will provide services in the future. In addition, its investments in information technology to facilitate service delivery need to be more closely tied to service delivery goals and objectives.

- **Strengthen controls to protect the personal information SSA develops and maintains.** Concerns about the widespread use of social security numbers (SSN), compounded by the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, have heightened the need to assess how SSNs are issued and protected and how Social Security data are used by law enforcement agencies in safeguarding national security. Since the attacks, SSA has further restricted the assignment of SSNs to individuals not authorized to work and implemented new procedures for verifying the authenticity of identity documents to ensure that only those with a legal right to SSNs receive them.