



Highlights of [GAO-09-511T](#), a testimony to the Subcommittees on Social Security and on Income Security and Family Support, Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

For years, the Social Security Administration (SSA) has experienced challenges managing a large disability workload and making timely decisions. In fiscal year 2006, SSA made about 3.7 million disability claims decisions, while over a million were awaiting a decision. Further, SSA has faced staffing challenges and difficulties managing its workloads at its network of approximately 1,300 field offices, where millions of people go to apply for disability and retirement benefits, to obtain Social Security cards, and for a host of other services.

The Subcommittees on Income Security and Family Support, and on Social Security, House Committee on Ways and Means, asked GAO to address (1) key service delivery challenges facing SSA, particularly with respect to the backlog of disability claims, and (2) steps SSA is taking to address these challenges. This testimony is based primarily on reports assessing trends in disability claims processing and backlogs, steps SSA is taking to reduce the backlog, and other challenges SSA faces in meeting future service delivery needs. Certain information was updated to reflect recent legislative changes.

To view the full product, click on [GAO-09-511T](#). For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or bertonid@gao.gov.

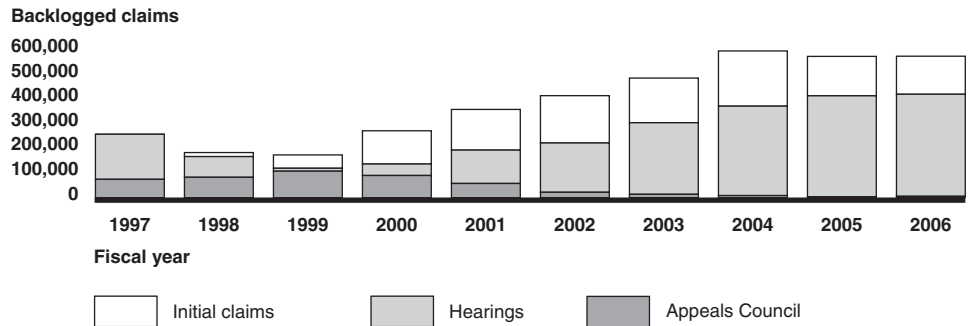
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Further Actions Needed to Address Disability Claims and Service Delivery Challenges

What GAO Found

In recent years, SSA has experienced a growing backlog of disability claims and deteriorating customer service at field offices. SSA's total backlog of disability claims doubled from 1997, reaching 576,000 in 2006, which has resulted in claimants waiting longer for final decisions. The backlog was particularly acute at the hearings level (see fig.). SSA also experienced declines in field office service delivery, with average customer wait times in field offices increasing by 40 percent from 2002 to 2006, and over 3 million customers waiting more than 1 hour to be served in 2008. Two key factors likely contributed to the backlog and service delivery challenges: (1) staffing reductions or turnover of field office staff and key personnel involved in the disability claims process, and (2) increased workloads. In particular, initial applications for disability benefits grew by more than 20 percent over the past 10 years. SSA projects further increases in workloads as the baby boom generation reaches its disability-prone years and retires.

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



Source: GAO analysis of SSA data.

SSA has taken steps to improve its disability claims process, reduce the claims backlog, and manage its field office workloads, but some efforts were hampered by poor planning and execution while others are too recent to evaluate. In 2006, SSA introduced a comprehensive set of reforms to improve the efficiency, accuracy and timeliness of the disability claims process. However, this initiative produced mixed results and many aspects were suspended to focus on the hearings backlog and other priorities. While final decisions regarding many aspects of this reform are pending, SSA outlined a new plan in 2007 that concentrates on clearing out backlogged cases at the hearings level. GAO is currently reviewing this plan as part of its ongoing work. To address overall workloads and maintain customer service, SSA has shifted workloads to less busy offices and deferred workloads it deemed lower priority. However, deferring certain workloads, such as continuing eligibility reviews, can result in beneficiaries receiving payments who no longer qualify. In response to a recent GAO recommendation, SSA agreed to develop a single service delivery plan to help it better manage future service delivery challenges. However, it remains unclear how SSA will address current and future challenges given its current service delivery infrastructure and resource constraints.