



Highlights of [GAO-09-149](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Social Security, Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives

### Why GAO Did This Study

The timely collection of relevant medical evidence from providers, such as physicians and psychologists, is key to the Social Security Administration (SSA) process for deciding whether an estimated 2.5 million new claimants each year have impairments that qualify them to receive disability benefits. The initial determinations are generally made by state agencies called Disability Determination Services (DDSs). We evaluated: (1) the challenges, if any, in collecting medical records from the claimants' own providers and ways SSA and the DDSs are responding to these challenges; (2) the challenges, if any, in obtaining high-quality consultative exams and ways SSA and the DDSs are responding to these challenges; and (3) the progress SSA has made in moving from paper to electronic collection of medical evidence. We surveyed 51 DDS directors, visited 5 state DDSs, reviewed sample case files, and interviewed officials with SSA, DDSs, and associations for claimants and providers.

### What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends SSA identify DDS evidence collection practices that may be promising, evaluate their effectiveness, and encourage implementation of successful practices in other states, as applicable. To do so, SSA should cost-effectively compile and assess additional data on the collection process. SSA should also work to identify and address barriers to expanded use of its online medical evidence submission options.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-09-149](#). For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or [bertonid@gao.gov](mailto:bertonid@gao.gov).

## SOCIAL SECURITY DISABILITY

### Collection of Medical Evidence Could Be Improved with Evaluations to Identify Promising Collection Practices

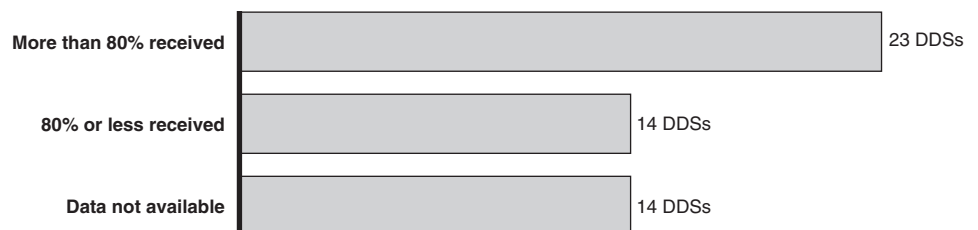
#### What GAO Found

Obtaining timely and complete medical records is a challenge to DDSs in promptly deciding disability claims, and DDSs have responded with additional provider contacts and adjustments to their payment procedures. Although DDSs pay most medical providers for medical records and SSA pays the DDSs to cover these expenses, 14 of 51 DDSs reported the percentage of requests for which they did not receive records was 20 percent or more in fiscal year 2007. In response to this challenge, all DDSs conduct follow-up with providers and claimants to urge them to provide records. Over half of the DDSs (34 of 51) have also implemented more timely payments for records and six increased the amount they pay. Although SSA evaluates DDS collection of medical records, it does not compile key data necessary to identify and share promising collection practices.

Recruiting and retaining qualified providers is a challenge to obtaining consultative exams needed to supplement insufficient medical records. For example, 41 of 51 DDSs reported routinely asking claimants' own providers to perform these exams; yet 34 reported providers never or almost never agree to do so. DDSs directors in our survey believe that current payment rates account for some of the difficulty recruiting and retaining consultative exam providers. In response to these challenges, 32 DDSs rely on medical providers who specialize in performing disability evaluations, and 20 pay providers for time spent preparing for appointments claimants fail to attend. SSA evaluates evidence from consultative exams, but these evaluations and the data they yield are too limited to identify and share promising DDS practices.

SSA has made progress moving to electronic collection of medical records, but faces challenges in fully implementing electronic retrieval and analysis of medical evidence. SSA now uses electronic images instead of paper copies of new claimants' records. Though SSA seeks to obtain all records electronically and provides options for online submission of records, only one large provider accounts for most of the records submitted online, and about half of all records received are on paper. To date, SSA has taken only limited action to identify and analyze the barriers providers face in using current electronic record submission options, and has not developed a strategy to address them. In the long run, SSA is participating in an advanced prototype to collect medical records in formats that can be searched and analyzed by electronically querying a hospital's records database and directly retrieving the claimants' records.

**Some DDSs Face Challenges Receiving Requested Medical Records, Fiscal Year 2007**



Source: GAO survey of DDS directors.