



Agency Priority Goal Action Plan

Improve Hearings Pending

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APG Goal Statement and Targets

Improve customer service in the hearings process by prioritizing those individuals who have waited the longest for a hearing decision.

Annual Targets:

- FY 2018 – Decide 97 percent of cases that begin the fiscal year 430 days old or older (decide ~374,000 cases).
- FY 2019 – Decide 95 percent of cases that begin the fiscal year 350 days old or older (decide ~355,000 cases).

Quarterly Targets:

	FY 2018	FY 2019
Q1	25 percent of aged cases decided	25 percent of aged cases decided
Q2	50 percent of aged cases decided	50 percent of aged cases decided
Q3	75 percent of aged cases decided	75 percent of aged cases decided
Q4	97 percent of aged cases decided	95 percent of aged cases decided

APG Overview

Members of the public may be eligible for Social Security or Supplemental Security Income benefits. After we decide eligibility for benefits, or that we will stop benefits, or change the amount, we send a letter explaining our decision. The public has the right to appeal decisions, which can be addressed at one of four levels, including an Administrative Law Judge Hearing.

At the end of FY 2017, over 1 million people were waiting an average of 605 days for a hearing decision on their cases. In FY 2017, due in part to reduced disability receipts and increased adjudicative capacity, we began reducing the number of hearings pending. While we began reducing the hearings pending, wait times remained unacceptable.

To reduce the hearings pending and lengthy wait times, we implemented numerous initiatives as part of our [Compassionate And REsponsive Service \(CARES\) Plan](#).

Alignment with Agency Strategic Plan

The Hearings Pending APG supports the following strategic goal, objective, and strategy defined in our FYs 2018 – 2022 Agency Strategic Plan.

- Strategic Goal 1: Deliver Services Effectively
- Strategic Objective 1.1: Improve Service Delivery
- Strategy:
 - Advance and update the CARES Plan to address the number of pending hearing decisions and lengthy wait times

Challenges

The following are continued challenges to reducing the hearings pending as of the beginning of FY 2018:

- Hearings Operations Staff Levels
 - Decreased staffing levels make it difficult to attain our goal and provide the service our claimants expect and deserve.
- Hearings Operations Productivity
 - We continue to focus on the timeliness of our decisions without sacrificing quality. Ensuring high quality at the hearings level also reduces time-intensive Appeals Council remands and subsequent hearings.
- Declination of Video Hearings
 - Declinations cause an inability to hold hearings by video at those hearing offices with more capacity.

Opportunities

Leveraging Lessons Learned

We identified lessons learned from the FY 2016 – FY 2017 Hearings Pending APG that we can put into action to ensure success. These actions include:

- Moving workloads around the country to better align with our resources;
- Transferring and scheduling cases according to established milestones to meet the 75-day hearing notice requirement and ensure completion by the end of the fiscal year; and
- Creating a top-100 oldest cases of concern report to ensure that complex cases, which are difficult to schedule and hear, receive sustained attention until they are completed.

Opportunities (cont.)

Accomplishing our goal will:

- Provide decisions to those claimants who have waited the longest;
- Reduce the average age of all cases pending at the hearings level; and
- Ultimately reduce the wait times for decisions.

Assumptions

The following are our assumptions for accomplishing this APG:

- Normal levels of ALJ and support staff attrition.
- Normal operations of our facilities throughout the year.
- Steady pipeline of disability claim receipts without any dramatic increase.
- Funding for overtime and replacement hiring.

Risks and Mitigation

Key Risks	Mitigation
High levels of attrition	With sufficient budgetary resources, we can replace ALJs and support staff accordingly.
Catastrophic events that force closure of our facilities	We can move work to other hearing offices to avoid ceasing services in an affected area; however, postponements of some hearings would be unavoidable.
Significant increase in disability claim receipts due to factors outside our control	We would maximize effective use of overtime and move work to other hearing offices to balance workloads.

Implementation Strategies

Strategies

**Increase
Adjudicatory
Capacity**

We plan to hire 35 ALJs¹ in FY 2018 and 35 ALJs in FY 2019. Additional ALJs will help offset production losses from ALJ attrition and allow us to continue to hear and decide cases timely.

**Process and
Decisional Quality
Improvements**

We continue to emphasize quality work and provide training on areas where errors are most common. Our focus on quality ensures that claimants are receiving high-quality decisions while reducing the incidence of remands from the Appeals Council.

¹ ALJ Hires aligned with FY 2019 President's Budget

Implementation Strategies (cont.)

Strategies	
Leverage Technology Improvements	<p>We are moving forward with Insight, which will expand to additional hearing offices this year. Insight uses natural language processing (NLP) to scan draft decisions for language that could result in errors, saving time by avoiding remands.</p> <p>Our duplicate identifying software is also in the procurement stage. This software will reduce the time it takes to review, decide, and draft cases by using artificial intelligence and NLP to identify duplicative medical evidence.</p> <p>We will continue to use video hearings to shift workloads around the country. Video hearings allow us to align offices with longer wait times with offices that have more adjudicative resources, reducing fluctuations in wait times from office to office. In FY 2017, we held 28 percent of hearings by video.</p>

Implementation Strategies (cont.)

Strategies	
Increase Accountability and Focus on Aged Cases	<p>We continue to hold monthly, and in some cases bi-weekly meetings, with our regions to discuss aged case processing and strategies. We have also outlined clear case processing deadlines, as indicated in our quarterly milestones, and have used lessons learned from the previous year to inform our strategy. This process ensures that cases are being worked in First-In-First-Out order and that our oldest cases are prioritized for hearings, decisions, and closure.</p>

FY 2018 Quarterly Milestones

Q1

- Transfer 100 percent of aged cases that will be heard by ALJs in other hearing offices. Transfer of cases early in the fiscal year; i.e., by the end of Q1, ensures assisting offices have sufficient time to process their aged cases.

Q2

- Schedule 100 percent of aged cases for a hearing. Scheduling cases by the end of Q2 ensures sufficient time in the fiscal year to hold hearings and complete those cases by the end of the fiscal year.

Q3

- Hold hearings for 100 percent of aged cases. Holding hearings on the aged cases by the end of Q3 ensures there is sufficient time to hold any necessary subsequent hearings and complete post hearing development prior to the end of the fiscal year.

Q4

- Close 97 percent of aged cases 430 days old or older. When a case is closed, we mail the claimant a decision on their appeal, and the case is no longer part of our pending workload.

FY 2019 Quarterly Milestones

Q1

- Transfer 100 percent of aged cases that will be heard by ALJs in other hearings offices.

Q2

- Schedule 100 percent of aged cases for a hearing.

Q3

- Hold hearings for 100 percent of aged cases.

Q4

- Close 95 percent of aged cases 350 days old or older.

Key Indicators

Secondary indicator: (Annual Target Only)

- Total Hearings Pending
 - FY 2018 Target – Reduce the total hearings pending to 900,100.
 - FY 2019 Target – Reduce the total hearings pending to 632,000.

Data Accuracy and Reliability

Our hearings workload data comes from our Case Processing Management System (CMPS) and is accurate and reliable. CPMS has been reviewed and validated by auditors who have endorsed its quality and reliability.

Our Target Age Summary report allows us to isolate cases that are 430 days old or older, to track their progress through the identified APG milestones. This report shows each region and office's progress toward the goal.

The Disability Adjudication Reporting Tool (DART) provides similar data to the Target Age Summary report, but with more detail, including a listing of all current aged cases that can be sorted by filing date, region, office, status, etc. DART will help us identify specific problem cases, so we can give them individualized attention to ensure they are processed timely.

Stakeholders

Congress: Our Office of Hearings Operations meets with congressional committees quarterly to discuss our CARES Plan and associated initiatives, and their feedback on this Plan is used to evaluate and improve our programs. Many of the initiatives detailed in the CARES Plan have a direct impact on our ability to hear and decide cases timely.

Claimant Representatives: We interact with claimant representatives through the National Association of Disability Representatives and National Organization of Social Security Claimants' Representatives in order to resolve questions they have about our programs or current business processes.

Stakeholders (cont.)

Claimant Advocacy and Disability Advocacy Organizations: These organizations advocate for the rights of the disabled and those applying for disability.

Labor Union Organizations: These organizations represent our employees and ALJs. They provide input to our Hearings Operations leadership.

FY 2018 Q4 Progress Update

FY 2018 Q4 Progress Update

Primary Indicator

FY 2018 Target: Decide 97 percent of cases that begin the fiscal year at 430 days old or older (decide ~374,000)

FY 2018 Q4² Results: Decided 98 percent of cases that began the fiscal year 430 days or older.

	FY 2018 Target	FY 2018 Results
Q1	25 percent of aged cases decided	33 percent of aged cases decided
Q2	50 percent of aged cases decided	64 percent of aged cases decided
Q3	75 percent of aged cases decided	86 percent of aged cases decided
Q4	97 percent of aged cases decided	98 percent of aged cases decided

² FY 2018 Q4 results are through September 28, 2018, which is the end of the operating month.

FY 2018 Q4 Progress Update (cont.)

Secondary Indicator Q4 Results (Annual Target Only)

Total Hearings Pending

FY 2018 Target: 900,100

FY 2018 Results: 858,383

Overall APG Progress

In FY 2018, we held hearings on 99.28 percent of all cases that started the year at 430 days or older and issued decisions on 98 percent of those cases, exceeding our goal to issue decisions on 97 percent of aged cases. We began FY 2018 with 1,056,026 hearing cases pending. We reduced the pending cases every month in FY 2018, ending the year with 858,383 hearings pending. Our closing hearings pending cases exceeded our target by 41,717 cases. Through September 2018, we decreased our hearings pending cases for 21 consecutive months.

FY 2018 Q4 Progress Update (cont.)

Summary of FY 2018 Progress

Our hiring, increased use of technology, and close monitoring of aged cases were some of the strategies we used to achieve our target of completing 97 percent of cases that began the fiscal year 430 days old or older.

We held 29 percent (179,315) of our hearings by video, which is more than any prior year.

We hired approximately 700 support staff, some of which included decision writers and legal assistants. The legal assistants support critical needs in hearing offices and maintain our ability to prepare cases for hearings in a timely manner. The increase in decision writers and legal assistants helped decrease the number of cases awaiting a decision. However, we continue to remain significantly understaffed relative to our ideal ALJ-to-support staff ratio.

One indicator of the quality of our decisions in the ALJ agree rate for hearing cases appealed to the Appeals Council. Our FY 2018 Appeals Council agree rate for ALJ decisions was 88.7 percent, exceeding our target of 85 percent by over 3 percent.

FY 2018 Q4 Progress Update (cont.)

Milestone Update:

FY 2018 Q4 Milestone Summary	
Milestone	Close 97 percent of aged cases 430 days old or older. When a case is closed, we mail the claimant a decision on their appeal, and the case is no longer part of our pending workload.
Status (e.g., Complete, On-Track, Missed)	Complete
Results/Comments (Provide discussion of Progress, changes from last update, Anticipated Barriers or other Issues Related to Milestone Completion)	In FY 2018, we held hearings on 99.28 percent of all cases that started the year at 430 days or older and issued decisions on 98 percent of those cases, exceeding our goal to issue decisions on 97 percent of aged cases.

FY 2018 Q4 Progress Update (cont.)

Next Steps:

FY 2019 Q1 Milestone Summary	
Milestone	Transfer 100 percent of aged cases that will be heard by ALJs in other hearings offices.
Status (e.g., Complete, On-Track, Missed)	On-track
Results/Comments (Provide discussion of Progress, changes from last update, Anticipated Barriers or other Issues Related to Milestone Completion)	We began to transfer FY 2019 targeted aged cases in the third quarter of FY 2018. We expect to complete all aged case transfers by the end of the first quarter of FY 2019.

Historical Data

Fiscal Year to Date Aged Case Completion



Historical Data

Secondary Indicator - Total Hearings Pending

Targets
 FY 2014: 932,000
 FY 2015: 1,056,000
 FY 2016: 1,087,000
 FY 2017: 1,071,000
 FY 2018: 900,100

