

Social Security: Improving Hiring Processes at State Disability Determination Services

Social Security Advisory Board Issue Brief

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Issue

The Social Security Act requires state Disability Determination Services (DDSs) to determine medical eligibility for disability on behalf of the Social Security Administration (SSA).¹ The DDSs assess Disability Insurance (DI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) claims at the initial and reconsideration levels and continuing disability reviews for program integrity.² Entirely funded by SSA, the DDSs comply with SSA policies, procedures, and operational decisions, including the determination of when a DDS may hire.

The National Council of Disability Determination Directors (NCDDD) has consistently reported that episodic hiring freezes issued by SSA and the timing of hiring approvals are key factors affecting workload processing.³ The SSA Office of the Inspector General considers DDS staffing “one of its [SSA’s] biggest human capital challenges...”⁴ This issue brief seeks to examine the impacts of episodic hiring and make recommendations to inform SSA policy.

Background

DDSs make initial and reconsideration determinations for SSA on most disability claims filed by residents of that state.⁵ While DDSs are entirely federally funded, their management and staff are state employees. SSA allocates funds for each DDS for hiring each year.⁶ However, if SSA is working under a continuing resolution, it may alter previously approved hiring or implement a hiring freeze.⁷ These freezes extend to the DDSs, regardless of the available federal funds remaining in the state DDS budget.

¹ Title 42, Chapter 7, USC Section 421(a)(1). This holds unless a state denies or fails to meet performance requirements.

² SSA Blue Book. [Disability Evaluation Under Social Security](#). Accessed April 28, 2025.

³ One Million Claims and Growing: Improving Social Security's Adjudication Process. Hearing before the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Social Security, 118th Congress, October 26, 2023. [Testimony of Jacqueline Russel](#), 2.

⁴ Social Security Administration. [Agency Financial Report Fiscal Year 2024](#), p. 166. Accessed August 27, 2025.

⁵ Title 20 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) [§ 404.1603](#) and [§ 416.903](#). DDSs may request to transfer claims to another state or SSA if their workload exceeds capacity. SSA processes disability claims outside the United States and those transferred from state DDSs.

⁶ SSA, [Budget Overview FY 2024](#), 9.

⁷ SSA, OIG, [The Social Security Administration's Human Capital Planning](#), A-02-19-50866 September 2022, 15. Accessed February 11, 2025.

DDS hiring freezes can significantly affect case processing. A recent SSA OIG report found that case processing times and the number of cases waiting in the queue increased from FYs19-24 as the number of experienced examiners (those with at least one year of experience) and the number of medical consultants dropped by 11% and 13%, respectively.⁸ SSA's Office of the Chief Actuary noted delays in preparing, publishing, and filling job announcements through state human resource procedures following a hiring freeze. Lastly, delays in SSA's approval of the DDS hiring authority can mean a rushed, time-limited recruitment effort at the end of the fiscal year due to time constraints on annually appropriated funds.⁹

While all new hires require training and mentoring, as well as time, to become proficient examiners, episodic hiring requires the state DDS to divert larger numbers of experienced staff from case processing to train and mentor multiple or very large classes of new hires. While the number of DEs was similar in 2018 and 2021, the SSA's Office of the Chief Actuary determined that a 20 percent drop in DDS determinations was due to a 21 percent drop in the number of fully trained DDS examiners who were pulled away from case processing to teach others (see Figure 1, below).¹⁰ State-reported trainee data further illustrates the point. NCDDD's 2022 survey found that DEs employed for less than two years ranged from 4.2-82 percent among survey respondents, with a median of 30.5 percent.¹¹ Coupled with the time-to-proficiency estimate of more than two years, this equates to almost one-third of the national DE workforce who lack the experience to work at full productivity.

Looking forward, SSA's Office of the Chief Actuary projects that the level of pending cases at the DDS will increase 249 percent from 2023 to 2033, assuming an increase in the annual level of initial disability determinations by 15 percent and the number of Disability Examiners (examiner) are retained at 2023 levels with improved productivity.¹² SSA's

⁸ SSA, OIG, [Staffing, Productivity, and Processing Times at State Disability Determination Services](#), Audit Report 072309, July 2025, 2-3.

⁹ NCDDD, "[FTE/FTP Strike Team proposal](#)" provided to SSAB staff, February 28, 2024. DDS directors have told the Board that the job of an examiner requires both competencies in the policies and procedures taught through examiner training and a unique "soft" skill set that can be difficult to find among applicants. The directors indicate it is easier to recruit when positions can stay open longer.

¹⁰ Stephen C. Goss and Michael L. Stephens. [Social Security Disability Claims: Past and Projected](#). Figure C. DDS Disability Determinations Per Disability Examiner, SSA Actuarial Note No. 163, May 8, 2024, 4.

¹¹ NCDDD, [Report on National Trends](#), 16.

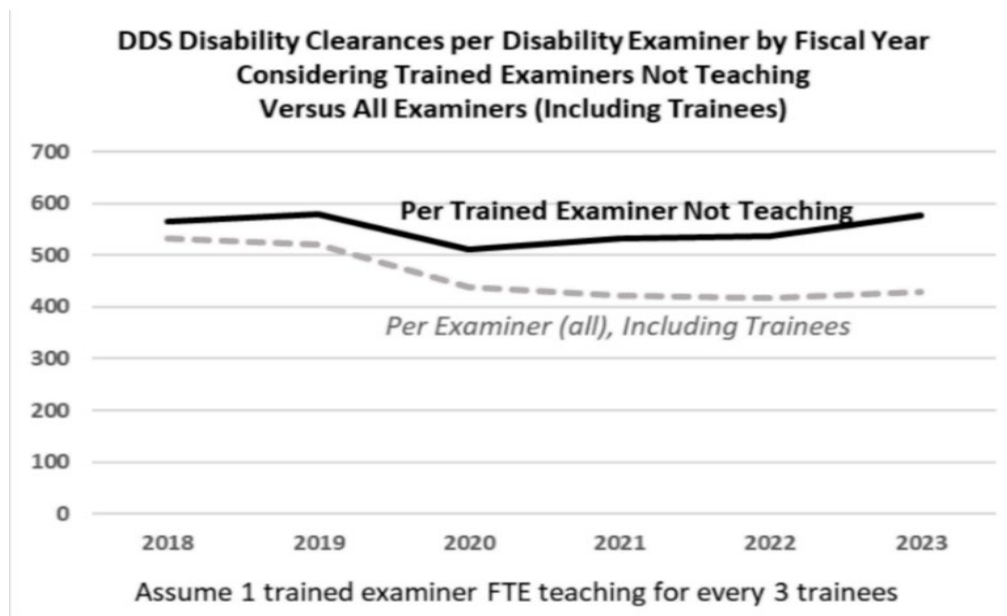
¹² Improved productivity assumes a reduced need to divert experienced staff away from case processing to train new staff. Goss and Stephens, "[Social Security Disability Claims Pending Determination: Past and Projected](#)," 6.

budget planners acknowledged that DDS workload processing challenges would likely grow, even assuming no funding interruptions or other reductions in DDS productivity.¹³

DE Proficiency and DDS Productivity

Figure 1, below, uses data from SSA’s Office of the Chief Actuary to show that while the number of disability claims processed per examiner (including trainees) fell between FYs 18 and 22, productivity levels of experienced DEs recovered quickly after the pandemic.¹⁴ During the pandemic, there was limited access to medical care (and, by extension, medical records); SSA also instituted policy changes that may have contributed to the decrease in processed claims in FYs 20 and 21.¹⁵ Still, the SSA data represented in Figure 1 shows variation in DE productivity for trained examiners not teaching compared to all examiners, including trainees.¹⁶

Figure 1. DDS Clearances per Disability Examiner by Fiscal Year



Source: SSA Office of the Chief Actuary

¹³ SSA, [Budget Overview FY 2024](#), 18--19. In addition to staffing, obtaining current medical records and needed clinical examinations proved challenging during the pandemic and immediately after.

¹⁴ Goss and Stephens. ["Disability Claims Pending,"](#) 4. The Actuarial Note states that experienced examiners in the DDSs who are not training new staff are currently at least as productive as they were in 2018, before the start of the backlog.

¹⁵ SSA OIG, [The COVID-19 Pandemic's Effect on Disability Determination Services' Processing of Disability Claims](#). A-01-20-50963 June 2023, 3.

¹⁶ This analysis, while helpful, may rely on a definition of "trainee" that is not consistent across SSA's management information.

Diverting experienced examiners to train new hires may result in a short-term loss of productivity, which should be resolved as the new hires become proficient. However, productivity outcomes remain contingent on other factors, including examiner attrition and external competition for trained staff.

Assisting the DDSs

SSA assists the DDSs by providing federal support for workload processing. Typically, the support comes through the six federal disability processing centers (or from one of four regional processing units) staffed by SSA employees who process claims on behalf of states that request assistance. SSA data show that the processing centers handled less than one percent of all disability claims between 2012 and 2015, gradually increasing to a high of processing 4.8 percent of claims received to date in 2025.¹⁷

The 2015 Bipartisan Budget Act requires a medical or psychological consultant to review the medical portion of disability claims.¹⁸ Typically, DDS hires directly or contracts for these positions. More than half of the 2022 NCDDD respondents reported they are not sufficiently staffed with medical consultants.¹⁹ Due to the growing backlog of cases needing medical review, SSA established a national contract with medical professionals to assist the states. The objective is to allocate professional resources across the country to states that lack adequate medical consultants.²⁰ These consultants began case review in early FY 24.

¹⁷ SSA, "[Annual Data for Initial Disability Cases Involving the Processing Centers Average Processing Time](#)," *Open Government Initiative* website, accessed August 26, 2025. Some DDS directors have told Board staff that federal employees working on behalf of DDSs require significant training and oversight by the state DDS employees to process claims appropriately. The 2025 data were provided by SSA and reflect status as of August 22, 2025.

¹⁸The Bipartisan Budget Act. [42 USC 42 U.S.C. 421\(h\)](#), 1677.

¹⁹ NCDDD, [Report on National Trends](#), 18.

²⁰ One Million Claims and Growing: Improving Social Security's Adjudication Process. Hearing before the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Social Security, 118th Congress, October 26, 2023. [Testimony by Linda Kerr-Davis, Acting Deputy Commissioner of Operations, Social Security Administration.](#)

Recommendations

The Board recommends that SSA allow DDSs more latitude to manage their allocated budget to recruit and fill open positions.²¹ Specifically, once funding is allocated to the DDS and hiring numbers are agreed upon, allow the DDSs to use available resources to address staffing needs. Second, the Board recommends that SSA include the DDSs in the agency's human capital planning efforts as required under federal regulation.²² The Board understands the need to stay within the Limitation on Administrative Expenses (LAE)²³ level set forth by Congress and supports SSA's efforts to avoid deficiency. Still, SSA's approach to state-level hiring authority has significant consequences for DDSs and case processing. Absent permission for an exception, SSA's hiring freezes prevent the DDSs from backfilling even a portion of vacant positions **using funds already allocated** to the DDSs. With better coordination, SSA could help the DDS address the ongoing understaffing that happens under the current process.

Conclusion

The SSA's approach to hiring new DDS staff makes complex work more difficult. The current disability determination process requires DDS management to hire (and train) employees who can evaluate complex medical and vocational information. Attrition at the state DDSs, coupled with hiring freezes, challenges the DDSs to complete the work on behalf of SSA. State DDSs will continue to struggle to maintain a well-trained, adequately-sized workforce and meet claimants' needs without SSA's consistent, sustained support. Recognizing the implications of hiring freezes on the DDSs, particularly when existing federal funds are available in state DDS budgets, is critical for SSA's human capital management efforts.

²¹ SSA OIG, [SSA's Major Management and Performance Challenges During FY 24](#), 022401, November 5, 2023, 2.

²² Title 5 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) § 250.203 [Strategic human capital management systems and standards](#). Accessed June 26, 2025.

²³ SSA's LAE specifies the level of appropriated funds the agency may use for operational expenses. Congressional Research Service. [Social Security Administration \(SSA\): Trends in the Annual Limitation on Administrative Expenses \(LAE\) Appropriation](#). R47097. William R. Morton Analyst in Income Security. September 17, 2024

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