GAO found—through its survey of 52 of the 54 Disability Determination Service (DDS) directors and interviews with SSA officials and DDS staff—that the DDSs face three key challenges in retaining examiners and enhancing their expertise:

**High turnover:** Over half of all DDS directors surveyed said that examiner turnover was too high in their offices. We found that examiner turnover was about twice that of federal employees performing similar work. Nearly two-thirds of all directors reported that turnover has increased SSA's hiring and training costs and claims-processing times. And two-thirds of all directors cited stressful workloads and noncompetitive salaries as major factors that contributed to turnover.

**Recruiting and hiring difficulties:** More than three-quarters of all DDS directors said they had difficulties over a three-year period in recruiting and hiring examiners. Of these, more than three-quarters said these difficulties contributed to increases in claims-processing times, examiner caseload levels, backlogs, and turnover. More than half of all directors reported that state-imposed compensation limits contributed to hiring difficulties.

**Gaps in key skills:** Nearly one-half of all DDS directors said that at least a quarter of their examiners needed additional training in areas critical to disability decision-making. Over half of all directors cited factors related to high workload levels as obstacles to examiners' receiving additional training.

Despite the workforce challenges facing them, a majority of DDSs do not conduct long-term, comprehensive workforce planning. In prior reports, GAO found that such planning should include key strategies for recruiting, retaining, training, and otherwise developing a workforce capable of meeting long-term agency goals. However, of the DDSs that engage in longer-term workforce planning, a majority have plans that lack such key workforce planning strategies. Directors cited numerous obstacles to long-term workforce planning, such as lengthy state processes to approve DDS human capital changes.

SSA's workforce efforts have not sufficiently addressed current and future DDS human capital challenges. Federal law requires agencies to include in their annual performance plans a description of the human capital strategies needed to meet their strategic goals. However, GAO's review of key SSA planning documents shows they do not include a strategic human capital plan that addresses current and future DDS human capital needs. Thus, SSA does not link its strategic objectives to a workforce plan that covers the very people who are essential to accomplishing those objectives. GAO also found that SSA has not provided human capital assistance in a consistent manner across the DDSs and that SSA's effectiveness in helping the DDSs negotiate human capital changes with the states can be limited by such factors as state budget problems and personnel rules. Finally, SSA has not used its authority to establish uniform human capital standards, such as minimum qualifications for examiners, which would address, on a nationwide basis, some of the DDS challenges.