Better Timeliness Metrics Needed to Assess Transfers of Appeals Work

What GAO Found

Over the past decade, the Social Security Administration (SSA) increasingly transferred appealed disability cases awaiting decisions from offices with backlogs to offices with more capacity as processing times lengthened. From fiscal years 2008 through 2017, the percentage of cases that were transferred increased from 14 to 43 percent. Although transfers are meant to improve timeliness of appeal decisions, average processing times grew and older pending cases increased over fiscal years 2012 through 2017. According to SSA officials, multiple factors, such as an increase in hearing requests after the 2007-2009 recession, contributed to longer processing times.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends SSA (1) develop timeliness metrics that more accurately reflect offices’ performance in light of case transfers, and (2) evaluate costs and benefits of changing system limitations that hinder users from correctly and efficiently identifying cases to transfer. SSA agreed with both recommendations.

Why GAO Did This Study

Individuals who do not agree with an initial decision on a claim for Social Security disability benefits can ultimately appeal by requesting a hearing before an administrative law judge. At the end of fiscal year 2017, more than 1 million claimants who had appealed were awaiting a decision, and they waited, on average, 605 days. To help reduce processing times of appeals, SSA transfers cases from backlogged offices to those with greater capacity. GAO was asked to review SSA’s efforts to redistribute its appeals work.

This report examines (1) trends in SSA’s transfers and processing times of appealed cases over the past decade, (2) SSA’s monitoring of efforts to meet processing time goals through case transfers, and (3) any challenges SSA faces in transferring cases between offices.

GAO analyzed SSA case processing data from fiscal years 2008-2017; reviewed SSA policies and operational guidance; observed SSA’s systems for case transfers; and interviewed SSA officials at the agency’s headquarters and offices in 3 of its 10 regions, selected for the large number of cases transferred and proximity to national centers established to process transferred cases.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends SSA (1) develop timeliness metrics that more accurately reflect offices’ performance in light of case transfers, and (2) evaluate costs and benefits of changing system limitations that hinder users from correctly and efficiently identifying cases to transfer. SSA agreed with both recommendations. View GAO-18-501. For more information, contact Elizabeth H. Curda at (202) 512-7215 or CurdaE@gao.gov.