

**Social Security Advisory Board  
Minutes  
Board Meeting  
April 18-19, 2018**

**Location:** 400 Virginia Ave SW  
Suite 625  
Washington, DC 20024

**Time:** 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

**SSAB Members:** Kim Hildred, Chair  
Henry Aaron  
Nancy Altman  
Lanhee Chen  
Bernadette Franks-Ongoy  
Jagadeesh Gokhale (via conference)

**SSAB Staff:** Claire Green, Staff Director  
Diane Brandt, Research Director  
Anita Grant, Senior Advisor  
Jenn Rigger, Senior Advisor  
Joel Feinleib, Staff Economist  
Bethel Dejene, Management Analyst  
Caitlyn Tateishi, Management Analyst  
Conway Reinders, Policy Analyst  
Kiyana Grimes, Research Assistant  
Dylan Hughes, Communications Assistant

**NOSSCR Participants:** Lisa Ekman, Director of Government Affairs  
Stacy Cloyd, Deputy Director of Government Affairs

**GAO Participants:** Elizabeth Curda, Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security  
Issues  
David Powner, Director of Information Technologies

**ACUS Participant:** Matt Wiener, Executive Director

**SSA Participants:** Theresa Gruber, Deputy Commissioner, Hearings Operations  
Christopher Dillon, Acting Deputy Chief Administrative Law Judge,  
Hearings Operations  
Rajive Mathur, Deputy Commissioner, and Chief Information Officer,  
Systems  
Sean Brune, Chief Program Officer for IT Modernization, Office of  
Commissioner

**SSA OIG Participants:** Rona Lawson, Assistant Inspector General for Audit  
Jeffrey Brown, Director of Information Technology Audis Division

On April 18, the board met with representatives of the National Organization of Social Security Claimants' Representatives (NOSSCR) to discuss the Social Security Administration's (SSA's) disability adjudication system. The number of cases waiting for a hearing has decreased in the past year, but the average wait time is similar to that of previous years. NOSSCR attributed much of the reduction in the backlog to a reduction in hearing requests, rather than reduced processing time due to process changes by SSA. Concurrently with the decrease in the hearings backlog, there has been an increase in the percent of cases that have been dismissed without a hearing. NOSSCR is concerned about the increase in dismissals, particularly when they occur due to SSA's inability to contact a claimant about a pending hearing, despite the claimant's good faith effort to update a change of contact information. NOSSCR knows of no data distinguishing between dismissals due to claimants' voluntary withdrawals of applications, and those due to apparent mistakes by SSA.

NOSSCR also identified a growing decision writing backlog of claims, which has doubled in recent years. SSA hired more Administrative Law Judges (ALJs) but failed to hire sufficient support staff to handle the increase in claims.

Since the number of pending claims varies by SSA region, video hearings have been offered as a potential solution because they offer the possibility of spreading the demand for hearings more evenly across geographical regions based on staff availability. Finally, NOSSCR alerted the board of SSA's effort to implement software to remove duplicate records from disability claimants' applications. It is unclear how SSA will define "duplicate" for the purpose of coding the software, and NOSSCR questioned the need for spending \$38 million on software when SSA could potentially address the problem of proliferating duplicates simply by changing its policy regarding the submission of "all" records in an application.

The board then met with outside experts to discuss management challenges at SSA. Each participating expert presented the recent and ongoing research of their respective organizations with relevance to SSA. The Government Accountability Office's (GAO's) recent work on SSA has fallen into four broad categories: challenges to managing the disability workload, program integrity, SSA's physical footprint, and information technology (IT) modernization.

Regarding the disability workload, GAO is analyzing the feasibility of transferring cases from one hearing office to another where there is the capacity to do the work. Regarding program integrity, GAO has conducted studies in three areas: SSA's processes for preventing and collecting overpayments, strategies for aligning SSA's anti-fraud efforts with the actual vulnerabilities for fraud, and establishing a process for identifying cases eligible for the compassionate allowance program. Regarding SSA's physical footprint, GAO found that SSA does not have an adequate strategy for making decisions

regarding the placement of SSA offices. Regarding IT modernization, GAO is developing a framework for overseeing SSA's IT modernization effort but had no current findings to report. SSA's OIG identified three major initiatives: investigating the regions with the highest wait times for disability hearings, evaluating the Ticket to Work program, and monitoring SSA's efforts to update job classifications and vocational information. The Administrative Conference of the United States (ACUS) has two priorities relevant to SSA. First is coordinating a potential federal court review of the judicial process for handling appeals of SSA's disability decisions. Second is developing recommendations to coordinate SSA's records on eligible representative payees with state court records of eligible guardians. Specifically, ACUS is considering the possibility of data sharing agreements between SSA and states.

The board met with SSA leadership with oversight of the disability adjudications process. The Deputy Commissioner of the Office of Hearings Operations (OHO) provided the board with updated statistics on disability hearings. The number of cases pending at the hearing level has decreased in the past 15 months. This drop is attributable to an increase in the productivity of the ALJs and a decline in the number of applications. The percent of cases with a video hearing has been relatively stable over the last 15-month period.

SSA acknowledged a backlog of claims pending with decision writers; these are claims that the ALJ has decided but have not been written. Currently, there are 78,000 cases in the decision-writing backlog, OHO's target for the number of cases pending a written decision is 30,000.

The second part of the board's open session during the first day was devoted to discussing SSA's IT challenges, particularly as they relate to SSA's ongoing effort to modernize its systems. The board first heard from officials outside of SSA's IT program with expertise in IT systems. The experts stressed the need for an executive-level review of the process and encouraged SSA to maintain a transparent list of current deliverables to allow for effective oversight. SSA's effort to update its Disability Case Processing System (DCPS) elicited skepticism from the experts due to the level of complexity involved and the apparent lack of a clear roadmap for the project's execution. SSA's choice to follow an "agile" approach to management was a source of concern as some felt it was difficult to budget and track. The experts expressed some concern about SSA's system security process.

After meeting with outside IT experts, the board met with the SSA officials overseeing the agency's IT modernization effort. The team described SSA's plan and the project's management structure. SSA has adopted an "agile" approach to the effort, allowing for short-term deliverables and flexible course corrections. One notable challenge with this approach as applied to SSA is the inevitable collision of the need for annual budgetary appropriations to advance the project over the long term with a project management approach that emphasizes shifting deliverables and flexible timeframes.

The remainder of the board's meeting on April 18<sup>th</sup> was conducted in executive session, as was the entire day's meeting on April 19<sup>th</sup>.

I certify that the minutes written for the April 18, 2018 meeting of the Social Security Advisory Board are correct.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kim Hildred".

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Kim Hildred  
Chair - Social Security Advisory Board