



SSA Disability Service Delivery during the Covid-19 Pandemic

**A Presentation by Elizabeth Curda
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to the Social Security Advisory Board
May 20, 2021**

Agenda

1. CARES Act funding to SSA
2. Steps SSA took in response to the pandemic
3. Challenges SSA encountered in delivering services during the pandemic
4. Trends in SSA's productivity

CARES Act Funding to SSA

- SSA received \$300 million under the CARES Act
- According to SSA officials, the funds were used to:
 - Pay the salaries and benefits of staff who normally conduct program integrity work that was suspended
 - Cover leave for staff unable to telework
 - Other COVID-19 related expenses, including information technology to expand telework.

Steps SSA Took in Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic Related to Disability Service Delivery

- Closed all public-facing offices in March 2020 with exceptions for limited in-office appointments for critical services
- Encouraged public to seek assistance online and by phone
- Temporarily halted all in-person hearings and conducted hearings by phone when claimants consented to do so
 - In September 2020, SSA began offering the option to attend online video hearings
- Temporarily suspended referrals for in-person consultative exams for claimants at both the initial and hearings levels
 - In May 2020, SSA released a framework for resuming in-person consultative exams on a voluntary basis

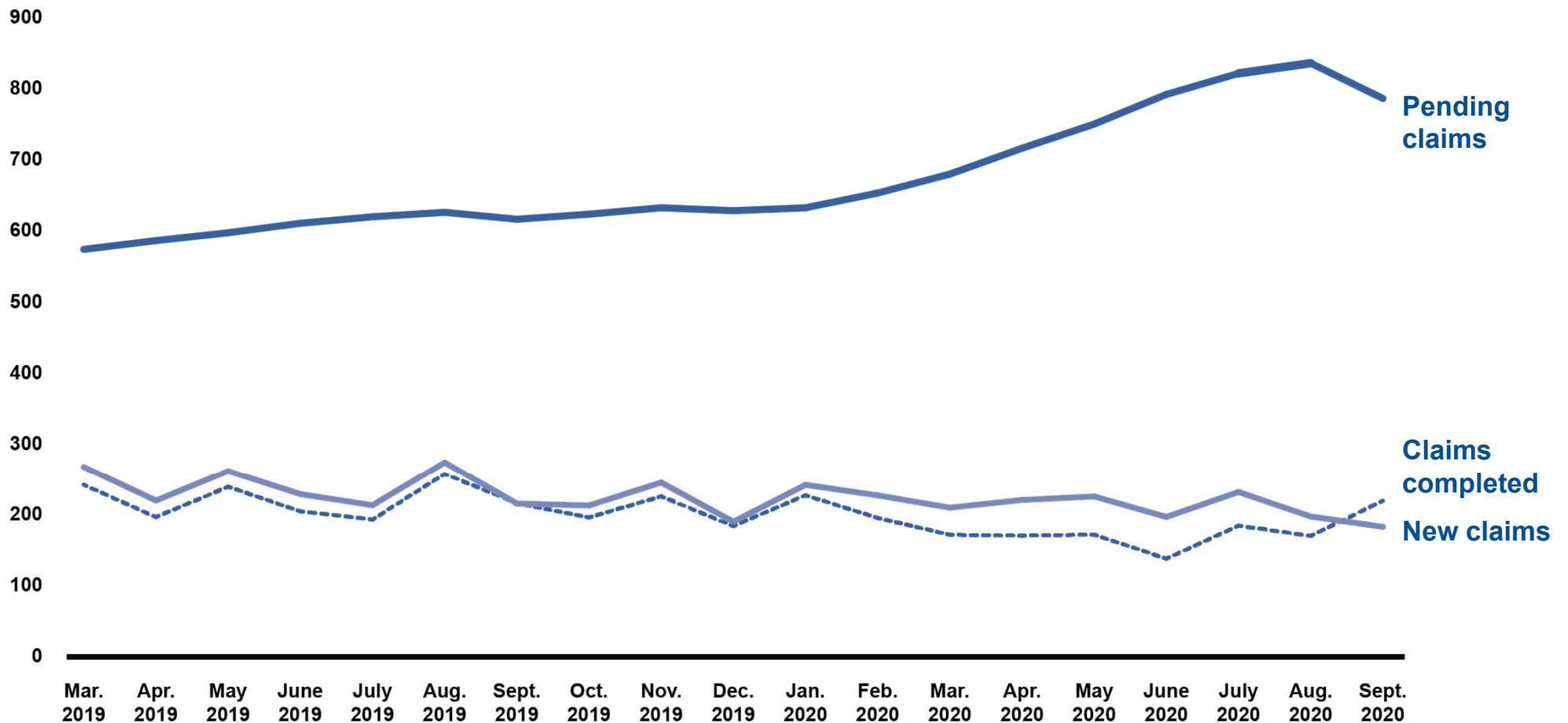
Challenges SSA Faced in Processing Initial Disability Claims Remotely

- DDS offices we surveyed varied in their response to the pandemic and the extent to which they were able to provide continuous service delivery
- DDS administrators cited two challenges with transitioning to a telework environment that affected DDS operations:
 1. Lack of technology among staff
 2. Inability to schedule consultative exams



Social Security Administration Initial-level Disability Determination Workloads

Number of Social Security disability claims (in thousands)



Challenges SSA Faced in Processing Disability Appeals Remotely

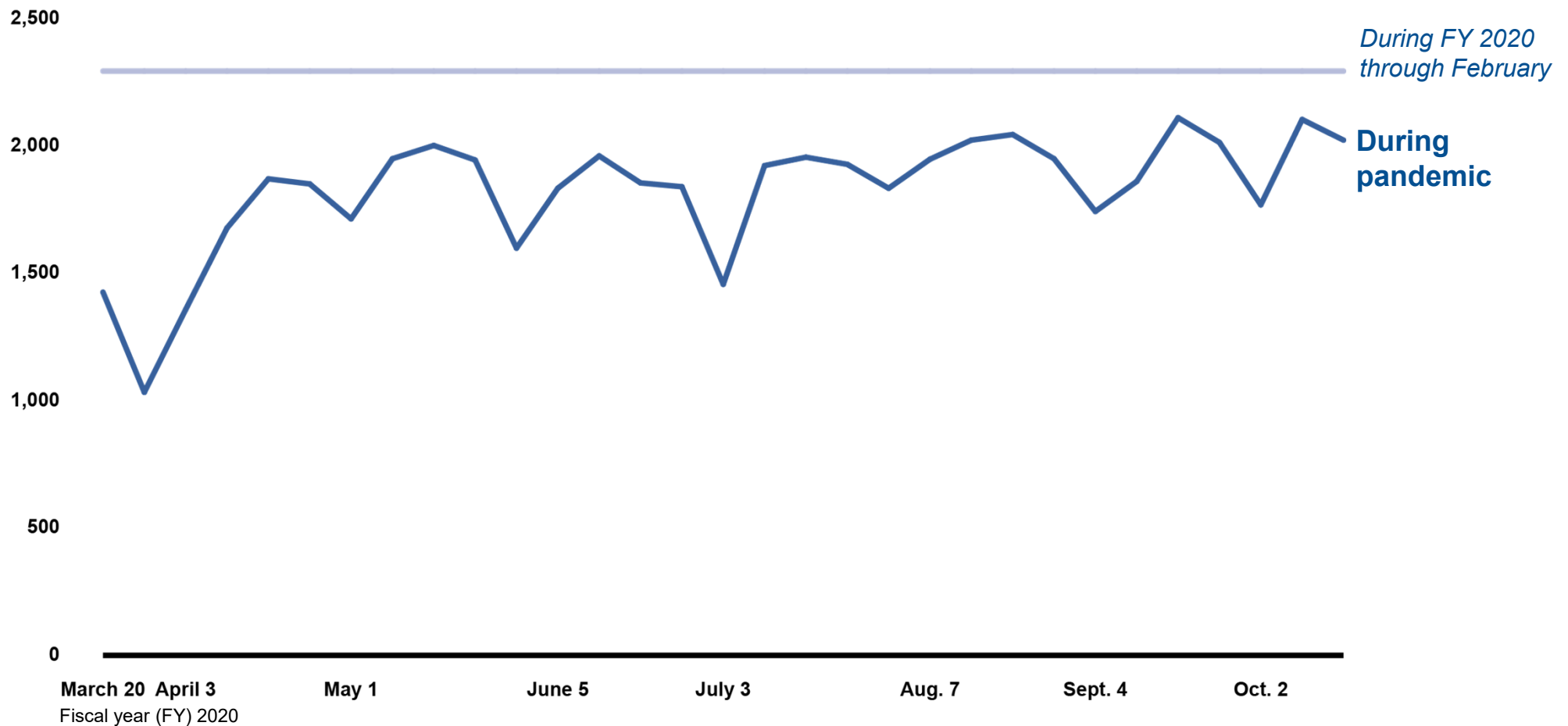
ALJs we surveyed and SSA headquarters officials we interviewed cited several challenges to conducting hearings during the COVID-19 pandemic. These included:

- Claimants or claimant representatives declining a phone hearing
- Challenges reaching claimants for phone hearings
- Limitations with technology
- Phone hearings taking longer to conduct
- Challenges obtaining medical evidence and consultative exams



Daily Average Number of Social Security Administration Disability Hearings Held

Daily average number of Social Security disability hearings





For more information

See our report at:

[COVID-19: Urgent Actions Needed to Better Ensure an Effective Federal Response \(gao.gov\)](#)

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Thank you!



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