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State Agencies' Role in Social Security Disability Determinations

September 23, 2021

Speaker Bios

Morning Session

Art Spencer began a career in 1973 with the Virginia Disability Determination Services (DDS), the state agency adjudicating Social Security disability claims, where Spencer led statewide training and for seven years was the Regional Director in Roanoke. Spencer became the Director of the Delaware DDS, the Disability Program Administrator in the Philadelphia Region in 1994, and the Director of the New Jersey DDS in 1995, where Spencer served for seven years. Beginning in 2002, Spencer was with the Office of Disability Programs in Central Office, focusing on the development and interpretation of disability policy, primarily non-medical and evaluation policies and procedures. Spencer led the development of the Request for Program Consultation process, a new way to resolve questions and disagreements on complex disability issues nationwide. In 2008, Spencer was selected for SSA's Senior Executive Service (SES) development program. Spencer's first assignment was within the Office of Disability Systems, coordinating the development tasks for the Disability Claims Processing system, and second assignment was in the San Francisco region leading operations for six teleservice centers. Between 2010 and 2014, Spencer was the Associate Commissioner for the Office of Disability Policy. Spencer holds a BS from Virginia Commonwealth University, an MPA from Virginia Tech, and is a member of the National Academy of Social Insurance.

Melissa Spencer began a career as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, before spending 13 years at the Virginia DDS as a Disability Examiner and Manager. Spencer joined Social Security in 1996 and served as the Deputy Associate Commissioner for SSA's Office of Disability Policy. Spencer is a graduate of SSA's SES Program and, before entering the SES, served as the

Acting Deputy Associate Commissioner for the Office of Quality Review, leading all quality reviews for SSA's programmatic workloads, including disability claims. Spencer redesigned the State DDS quality review processes by instituting virtual review and targeted denial review. Spencer has served on several national groups, developing expertise in key areas including childhood disability policy. Spencer provided leadership and guidance to states as the federal liaison for the Maryland, Delaware, and West Virginia DDSs. Spencer holds a BS in rehabilitation services from Virginia Commonwealth University.

Afternoon Session

Ian Harlow has served as the Director of the Pennsylvania Bureau of Disability Determination since February 2020. Harlow leads more than 700 employees and contractors in one of the top five states for disability case processing. During Harlow's tenure, Harlow transitioned the entire operation to telework, developed a virtual call center, and expanded language access opportunities to assist those impacted most by COVID. Prior to joining the Pennsylvania DDS last year, Harlow spent more than a decade in other Commonwealth positions, including Deputy Commissioner of Elections, where Harlow administered elections and oversaw campaign finance and lobbying disclosure activities; Commissioner of Professional and Occupational Affairs, where Harlow was a full voting member for the Commonwealth's professional licensure boards; and as Deputy Secretary for Regulatory Programs, where Harlow managed and directed staff to meet mission critical functions and goals. Harlow spent his early career serving as a consultant for various local, state, and federal elections, as well as an adjunct faculty member at Duquesne University. Harlow has been recognized for exceptional service by the Pennsylvania Department of State and the Community College of Beaver County. Harlow received a Master's in social and public policy analysis and a Bachelor's in political science and interactive media from Duquesne University. Harlow also holds an Associate's in computer information systems from the Community College of Beaver County. Harlow is a Board Member of NCDDD.

Jacki Russell is the North Carolina DDS Director. Russell brings more than 20 years of experience leading organizational change, strategic planning, professional development, and advocating for people with disabilities. Russell started a career in 1993 as a Speech Pathologist, providing services in homes, hospitals, skilled nursing facilities and schools. Russell later worked with the Wake County Public School System in several roles, including Speech Pathologist, Assistive Technology Specialist, Senior Administrator, Director of

Policy, and Senior Director of Policy and Fiscal Compliance. Russell has worked as the North Carolina DDS Director since 2018 and serves as the National Council of Disability Determination Directors' (NCDDD) President-Elect. Russell holds a BS from Ball State, Master's in administration from North Carolina State, and a Master's in speech pathology from North Carolina Central Universities.

Leon A. Scales is the President of the National Council of Disability Determination Directors (NCDDD), and Virginia DDS Director, with approximately 500 staff, responsible for accurate and timely medical determinations for Social Security and Medicaid disability applicants. Scales has held this position for 10 years and has spent his 24-year career at the DDS. Prior to becoming Director, Scales served in multiple capacities, including Disability Examiner, LAN Coordinator, Budget Manager, and Director of Operations. Scales has earned honors including multiple SSA Regional and SSA Associate Commissioners Citations and SSA Deputy Commissioner Operations Leadership Award. While Director, the VA DDS was the 2016 recipient of the SSA Associate Commissioner Phoenix Award. Scales is currently a member of the National Disability Interest Group and the National Association of Disability Examiners. Scales received a BA in history and an MPA from Virginia Tech, and is a graduate of the Commonwealth of Virginia Executive Institute.

Mary Wolfe is an Associate Commissioner for the State of Texas, serving at the Texas DDS Administrator since 2004. Wolfe's public service career spans over 43 years in Texas. As the former Commissioner for the Texas Rehabilitation Commission, Wolfe helped lead the consolidation efforts and transformation into the broader Health and Human Services System, of which the Texas Disability Services is a division of the state-federal partnership with SSA. Wolfe has provided testimony at both the state and federal legislative branches. Wolfe has been recognized for a commitment to rehabilitation and persons with disabilities, including from the Texas Senate and Governor's Office, SSA, and NCDDD. Wolfe previously served as NCDDD's Secretary and on the boards and workgroups of several universities and nonprofits in the area of vocational rehabilitation and disability services. Serving on national Rehabilitation Services Administration Prime Study Groups, Wolfe helped write and edit two professional rehabilitation periodicals. Wolfe holds a degree in public administration from St. Edwards University in Austin, Texas, and is a graduate of the Governor's Executive Leadership Program at University of Texas at Austin's LBJ School of Public Affairs. Wolfe is a Member of NCDDD.