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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

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January 30, 2017

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
Government Accountability Office
441 G St. NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

I am writing to request that the Government Accountability Office conduct a review of the Social Security Administration's (SSA) Office of Disability Adjudication and Review (ODAR) initiatives to reduce the disability backlog. The ODAR administers hearings, issues decisions, and reviews appeals to determine whether or not a claimant may receive SSA disability benefits.¹ ODAR through its Administrative Law Judges render over 600,000 disability determinations each year.²

Given the massive volume of claims that are submitted to ODAR each year, ODAR uses Average Processing Times (APT) to track hearing offices progress. APT also gives claimants an estimate of calendar days from the hearing request date to the disposition hearing date.³ ODAR's long term APT goal is set at 270 days.⁴ With that goal in mind, in 2007, SSA implemented various initiatives to speed up processing times and to address the disability backlog. These initiatives included opening five National Hearing Centers (NHC) that assist regional hearing offices across the country with video hearings in an effort to relieve regional hearing offices of older cases and to speed up processing times.⁵

¹ Social Security Administration Hearings and Appeals (accessed Jan 18, 2017)(www.ssa.gov/appeals/about_odar.html).

² *Id.*

³ Social Security Administration Office of Inspector General, *Hearing Office Average Processing Times* (A-05-15-50083) (Sept. 2015).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Social Security Administration Office of Inspector General, *The Social Security Administration's Efforts to Eliminate the Hearings Backlog* (A-12-15-15005) (Sept. 2015).

Despite these initiatives, APTs have worsened. According to an audit conducted by the SSA Office of Inspector General, the national APT for hearing decisions reached 490 days in FY 2016.⁶ On average, Missourians seeking hearings must wait approximately 448 days before a hearing date is set.⁷ Though Missouri has five hearing offices and a National Hearing Center⁸, many frustrated claimants turned to my office for help in navigating SSA's complex system and to simply get answers.

I request that your review focus on the following areas:

- 1) How effective are the five National Hearing Centers in decreasing SSA's disability backlog?
- 2) How effective are SSA's other recent initiatives to reduce SSA's disability backlog?
- 3) How effective are SSA's procedures for managing and overseeing disability claims to ensure they are being processed according to program rules?

Thank you in advance for your consideration. Should you have any questions, please contact Phylcia Woods with the Committee staff at (202) 224-2627.

Sincerely,



Claire McCaskill
Ranking Member
Senate Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs Committee

⁶ *Id.* at 12.

⁷ Social Security Administration Office of Inspector General, *supra* note 2, at C-1.

⁸ *Id.*