



**Agency Priority Goal | Action Plan | FYs 2022–2023 | FY 2023 – Q1**

---

# Improve Initial Disability Claims

---

Goal Leader: Stephanie Hall, Assistant Deputy Commissioner, Office of Operations

Deputy Goal Leader: John Owen, Associate Commissioner, Office of Disability Determinations

# Goal Overview

---

## Goal statement

Improve the customer experience by reducing the average processing time for initial disability claims and by prioritizing those individuals who have waited the longest for initial disability determinations.

- By September 30, 2023, achieve an average processing time for initial disability claims of 164 days.<sup>1</sup>
- By September 30, 2023, decide 85 percent of pending initial disability claims that begin the fiscal year 180 days old or older.

## Problem to Be Solved

- On average, customers are waiting too long (over six months in FY 2022) for an initial disability determination, and there are too many aged cases pending (approximately 377,000 initial cases older than 180 days at the beginning of FY 2023).
- The pandemic disrupted many of the workloads in our disability process, and we anticipate receiving an increase in initial disability claims that we will need to process.
- State Disability Determination Services (DDS), who make disability determinations, are experiencing difficulties maintaining appropriate staff levels, with historically high attrition and hiring-related challenges.

---

<sup>1</sup> This target is also a budgeted workload measure.

# Goal Overview

---

## What Success Looks Like<sup>2</sup>

- Reduced time customers wait to receive initial disability claims decisions.<sup>3</sup>
- Improved recruitment and retention to sustain necessary staffing and increased processing capacity and performance.
- Full implementation of a unified disability case processing system that allows all States to share work in a more seamless, efficient, and productive environment.

---

<sup>2</sup> Demonstrates progress towards achieving our Agency Strategic Plan's Build a Customer-Focused Organization and Improving the Accuracy and Administration of Our Programs strategic objectives.

<sup>3</sup> It will take a multi-year effort and adequate funding to reduce the average initial disability claims wait times.



## Tracking the goal

# Goal target(s)

Achievement statement Repeat the achievement statement from the goal statement on the previous slide		Key indicator(s) A "key performance indicator" measures progress toward a goal target	Quantify progress These values enable us (and you!) to calculate % complete for <u>any</u> type of target			Frequency When is there new data?
By...	We will...	Name of indicator	Target value	Starting value*	Current value	Update cycle
09/30/23	Achieve an average processing time for initial disability claims of 164 days	Initial Disability Claims Average Processing Time <sup>4</sup>	164 days	165 <sup>5</sup>	206 days	Monthly
09/30/23	Decide 85 percent of pending initial disability claims that begin the fiscal year 180 days old or older	Initial Disability Claims Aged Cases	Decide 85 percent of pending initial claims that begin the year 180 days old or older (377,280 in FY 2023)	0% <sup>6</sup>	48%	Monthly
		Initial Disability Claims Productivity Per Workyear <sup>7</sup>	Not Applicable	208	196	Monthly

\* FY 2021 actual data.

<sup>4</sup> Our FY 2023 Congressional Operating Plan includes planned performance based on our FY 2023 appropriation. Please visit [www.ssa.gov/budget](http://www.ssa.gov/budget) for more information.

<sup>5</sup> Average Processing Time (APT) resets at the beginning of each fiscal year. Our FY 2022 annual average APT was 184 days.

<sup>6</sup> Percent complete restarts at the beginning of each fiscal year. In FY 2022, we completed 96 percent of pending initial claims that were 180 days old or older at the start of FY 2022.

<sup>7</sup> DDS initial disability claims productivity per workyear (PPWY) measures the production rate in the DDSs for the initial claims workload and reports how much time an employee spends directly processing a work product to completion. The DDS initial disability claims PPWY is calculated by dividing the number of cases processed by the number of DDS workyears (WYs) expended to process those cases. The number of workyears attributed to initial claims is derived using a statistically valid sampling process.

# Goal Team

---

## Leadership Team

**Stephanie Hall**, *Assistant Deputy Commissioner, Office of Operations*  
Goal Leader

**John Owen**, *Associate Commissioner, Office of Disability Determinations*  
Deputy Goal Leader

*Deputy Associate Commissioner (Office of Operations)*  
Office of Disability Determinations

*Associate Commissioner (Office of Operations)*  
Office of Public Service and Operations Support

*Associate Commissioner (Office of Analytics, Review and Oversight)*  
Office of Quality Review

*Regional Commissioners (Office of Operations)*  
Regional Offices

## Implementation Team

# Goal Strategies

---

## **Implementation Strategies**

- Implement information technology (IT) initiatives and automation improvements that will increase DDS initial claims productivity and improve processing time.
- Prioritize claimants who have been waiting the longest for a decision by prioritizing the aged cases in scheduling consultative examinations and medical consultant reviews.
- Optimize DDS recruitment tools and employment flexibilities to hire and retain highly qualified employees.
- Increase Consultative Exam (CE) provider availability by assisting the DDSs with recruiting efforts to expand their CE provider network.
- Complete the deployment of disability claims in the Disability Case Processing System (DCPS2) by September 30, 2022.
- Expand electronic medical evidence collection via our electronic evidence acquisition framework.
- Increase disability case processing capacity by leveraging a support cadre of SSA employees from other areas of our organization and experienced re-employed annuitants.
- Deploy Intelligent Medical-Language Analysis Generation technology for medical evidence to all state DDSs by the end of calendar year 2022.

# Goal Strategies

---

## External Considerations

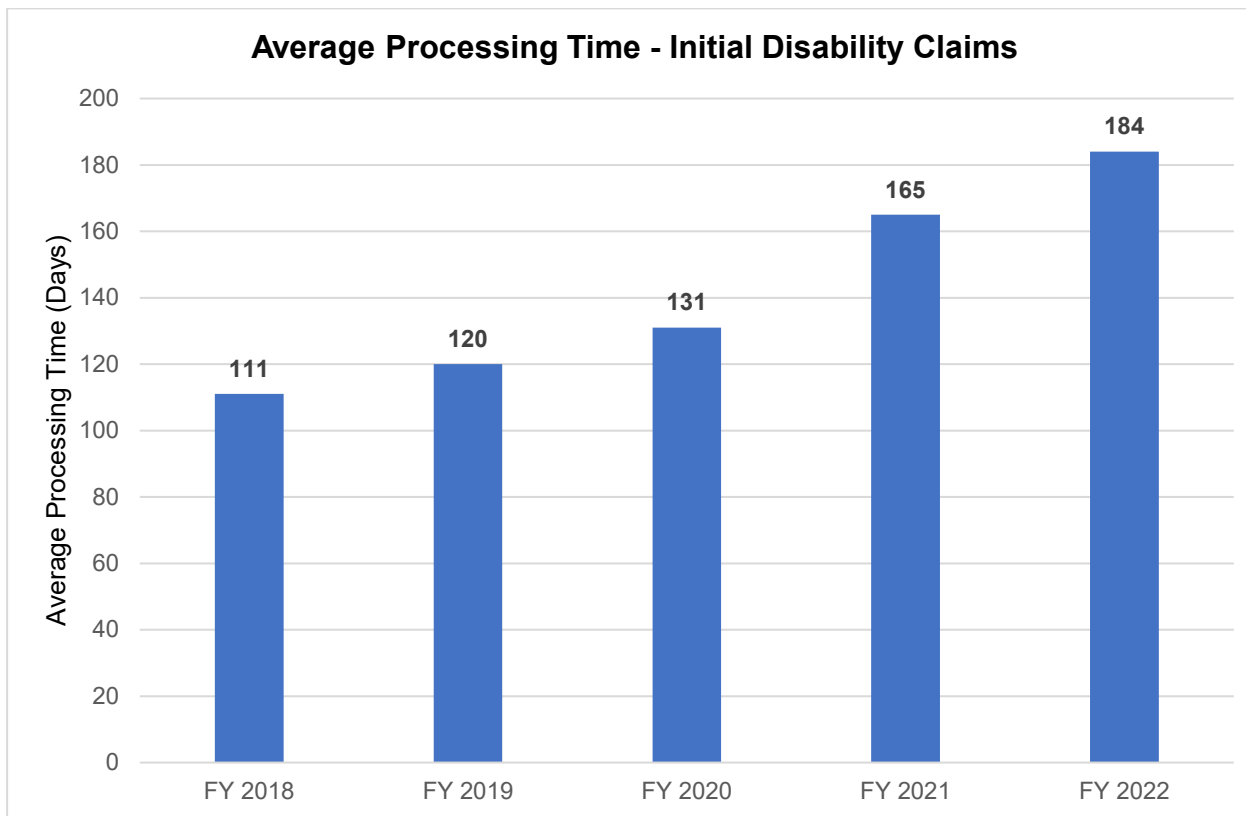
- Our Office of the Chief Actuary projects claims to increase, and our performance targets incorporate the effects of the projected increase through FY 2023. Additional unanticipated increases in initial disability claims could further increase our pending levels and extend wait times.
- The DDSs are State entities and subject to State policies and directions that can impact their productivity.
- The DDSs are experiencing high levels of attrition. In FY 2021, the overall DDS staff attrition rate was 13.6 percent, and the disability examiner attrition rate was 19.4 percent. In FY 2022, the final overall DDS staff attrition rate was 16.9 percent, and the disability examiner attrition rate was 22.8 percent, both of which are the highest rates in over 20 years.
- The DDSs are experiencing difficulties with recruitment and retention to maintain staffing levels.
- There were ongoing delays for claimants to receive in-person CEs, which are required to decide more than one third of initial disability claims that require additional medical evidence beyond what claimants provide. During the pandemic, recent medical evidence was less frequently available for the DDSs due to reduced treatment and doctor visits and reduced CE availability. The DDSs continue to work on increasing the number of available CE providers, and in FY 2022 they added over a thousand providers to the available pool. Although CE wait times can vary for claimants, the number of active providers in the network allows for all cases requiring a CE to be processed.
- While DCPS2 has provided across-the-board efficiencies in case processing, the transition to the new system tends to have short-term adverse productivity impacts on DDSs which recently transitioned to DCPS2. The three remaining DDSs (New York, California, and Alaska) began the transition to DCPS2 in late FY 2022.

- Economic factors such as the status of the job market, unemployment, and other benefits may influence whether someone files for disability.
- DDSs must balance their workloads, which includes working on stewardship reviews using dedicated funding in addition to making medical decisions on initial claims.
- Productivity improvements are contingent upon appropriation levels that allow for consistent overtime and staffing resources to the DDSs.



# Key indicators

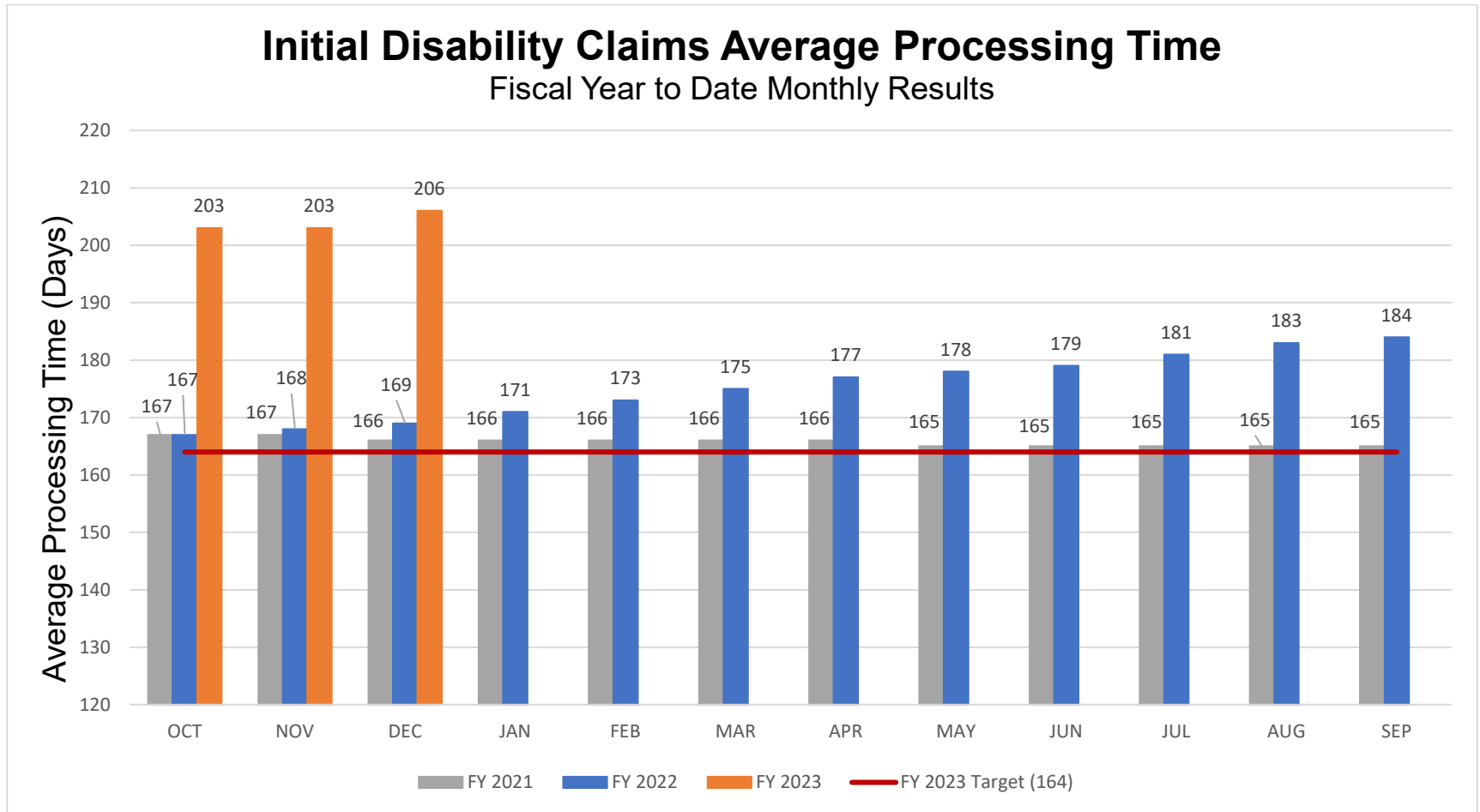
**Primary Indicator (historical):** Initial Disability Claims Average Processing Time<sup>8</sup>



<sup>8</sup>The pandemic began to impact operations in March of 2020, half-way through the fiscal year. FY 2021 processing time includes the full-year effect from the disruption caused by the pandemic. FY 2022 is a 53-week year for management information (MI) purposes. Data shown in the table reflects MI results through 53 weeks. The 52-week FY 2022 Initial Disability Claims average processing time result was also 184 days.

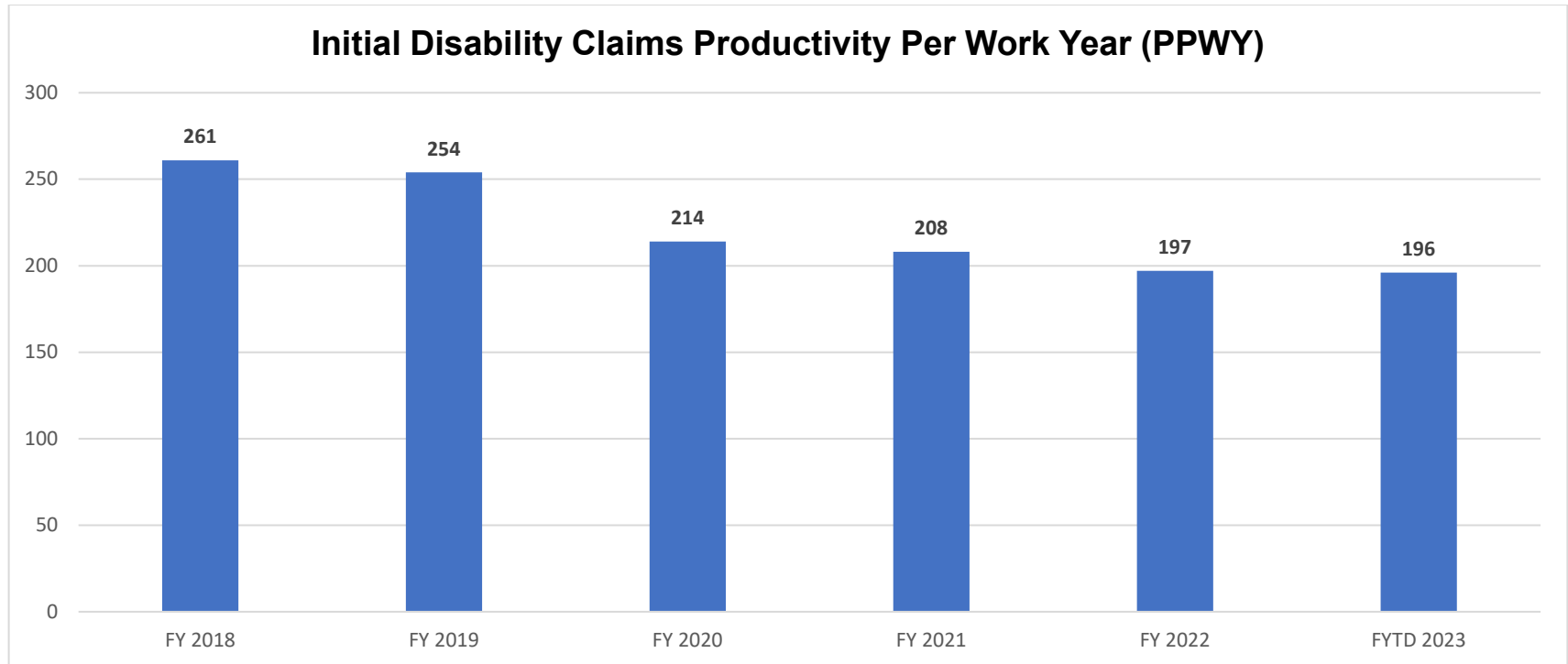
# Key indicators

**Primary Indicator:** Initial Disability Claims Average Processing Time



# Key indicators

## **Secondary Indicator:** DDS Initial Disability Claims Productivity per Workyear<sup>9</sup>



<sup>9</sup> FYs 2021, 2022, and 2023 reflect depressed productivity in large part due to continued recruitment and retention challenges and historically high attrition across the nation. FY 2022 contains 53 weeks instead of the typical 52-weeks in a Federal fiscal year. FY 2022 is a 53-week year for management information (MI) purposes. Data shown in the table reflects MI results through 53 weeks. The 52-week FY 2022 Initial Disability Claims PPWY result was 196.

# Key milestones

---

## Milestone Summary

Key Milestone	Milestone Due Date	Milestone Status	Comments
Prioritize the most aged initial claims while maintaining an average processing time under 170 days	Q1, FY 2022	Completed	
Decide 50 percent of pending initial disability claims that began FY 2022 180 days old or older	Q1, FY 2022	Completed	
Prioritize the most aged initial claims while maintaining an average processing time under 175 days	Q2, FY 2022	Completed	
Decide 70 percent of pending initial disability claims that began FY 2022 180 days old or older	Q2, FY 2022	Completed	
Prioritize the most aged initial claims while maintaining an average processing time under 180 days	Q3, FY 2022	Completed	
Decide 80 percent of pending initial disability claims that began FY 2022 180 days old or older	Q3, FY 2022	Completed	
Prioritize the most aged initial claims while maintaining an average processing time at or below 185 days	Q4, FY 2022	Completed	
Decide 85 percent of pending initial disability claims that began FY 2022 180 days old or older	Q4, FY 2022	Completed	

Key Milestone	Milestone Due Date	Milestone Status	Comments
Prioritize the most aged initial claims while maintaining an average processing time at or below 185 days	Q1, FY 2023	Not Met	The overall volume of initial claims pending at the start of FY 2023 was substantially higher than at the start of FY 2022 partially due to persistent staffing challenges. The higher pending levels led to our Q1 average processing time increasing to over 200 days.
Decide 50 percent of pending initial disability claims that began FY 2023 180 days old or older	Q1, FY 2023	Not Met	The volume of 180 day old or older cases to start FY 2023 was substantially more than last year, exceeding our capacity to process the targeted level.
Prioritize the most aged initial claims while maintaining an average processing time at or below 178 days	Q2, FY 2023	Not On-Track	We continue to prioritize the most aged claims, and to focus on improving our processing time both for all claims.
Decide 70 percent of pending initial disability claims that began FY 2023 180 days old or older	Q2, FY 2023	On-Track	
Prioritize the most aged initial claims while maintaining an average processing time at or below 171 days	Q3, FY 2023		
Decide 80 percent of pending initial disability claims that began FY 2023 180 days old or older	Q3, FY 2023		
Prioritize the most aged initial claims while maintaining an average processing time at or below 164 days	Q4, FY 2023		
Decide 85 percent of pending initial disability claims that began FY 2023 180 days old or older	Q4, FY 2023		

## Narrative – FY 2023 Q1

---

The average processing time (APT) for initial disability claims was 206 days at the end of the first quarter of FY 2023, which was significantly greater than our milestone target of 185 days, and 22 days higher than our FY 2022 annual average processing time of 184 days. We acknowledge that it is unacceptable for individuals to have to wait almost seven months to receive a disability decision. It remains our priority to mitigate further increases in average processing time for initial claims and to continue prioritizing the most aged claims awaiting a decision. To help us address the challenges, we established a special team dedicated to increasing DDS processing capacity and reducing claims backlogs.

At the start of FY 2023, we determined that 377,280 initial claims 180 days old or older were pending in the DDSs. As of the end of the first quarter, we decided 180,389 (about 48 percent) of those claims, which is slightly behind our end of first quarter 50 percent milestone goal. Although we did not meet our first quarter milestone goal, our expectation and message to the DDSs is to continue focusing on the remaining 196,891 initial claims from this population still awaiting a decision.

The most significant factor contributing to the increases in APT and volume of aged claims pending in FY 2023 is the continued challenge for DDSs to recruit, hire, and retain their staff. Some of the staffing challenges can be attributed to macro-economic conditions adversely impacting all employers, while some can be attributed to DDS-specific challenges. We have found low starting wages compared to comparable positions in the market, complexity of learning the job, and lack of qualified candidates applying for the position as impacting our DDSs in particular. We are committed to working with the DDSs to improve these conditions through the ongoing efforts of the Recruitment and Retention workgroup.

This workgroup has four major areas of focus:

- Improving DDS Work/Business Process Strategies
- Marketing for DDS Examiner Recruitment
- Reviewing the Disability Examiner Position
- Updates to Training Practices

Some actions the workgroup has taken include:

- Issuing recommendations that increased disability case processing capacity by leveraging a support cadre of SSA employees from other areas of our organization and experienced, re-employed annuitants.
- Creating new national marketing, training, and mentoring initiatives to address DDS recruitment and retention challenges.
- Engaging with State DDS Administrators to improve recruitment and retention at the State level as quickly as possible.

We anticipate staffing challenges will continue throughout FY 2023, which will impact our ability to reduce processing time. Additionally, DDS staff are balancing their time between completing initial disability claims and working on program integrity work to complete the medical continuing disability reviews funded in the FY 2023 appropriation, and our workload balance in 2023 reflects our commitment to address the immediate priority of making initial disability decisions.

Our goal in FY 2023 continues to be focused on mitigating any further increases in processing time and prioritizing decisions for those who have been waiting the longest. We are prioritizing cases that have been waiting the longest from an initial disability decision and are working toward deciding 85 percent of pending initial disability claims that began the fiscal year 180 days old or older by the end of September 2023.

# Data accuracy & reliability

---

Our official data source for average initial disability claim processing time is Management Information (MI) Central, a long-standing and reliable source. MI Central calculates the average processing time by adding time the case was with an SSA field office and with the State DDS, transit time between field offices and DDSs, and quality review time.

The DDS staffing information and workload processed counts used to calculate Productivity Per Workyear (PPWY) come from the Disability Operational Data Store database. The direct PPWY is calculated by dividing the DDS processed count for the initial disability claims workload by the DDS workyears spent directly processing this workload. Direct PPWY excludes other paid time categories such as leave, training, management, travel, etc. This database has been the official source of DDS management information for many years.

The State Agency Workload Sampling (SAWS) report uses the staffing information in conjunction with workload and work-sampling data to provide comprehensive unit times indicating the number of workyears it takes to process DDS workloads and perform other DDS operations. All DDS staff are sampled once a week, every week of the fiscal year. The sample size is statistically valid and is based on the number of workloads sampled and the size of the organization. DDS time is attributed to the various workloads based on the sampling data.



# Additional information

---

## **Stakeholder / Congressional Consultations**

### **Internal Stakeholders:**

**Office of Quality Review (OQR):** Provides quality review of DDS claims decisions.

**Office of Retirement and Disability Policy (ORDP):** Oversees policies and criteria used to process disability claims.

### **External Stakeholders:**

**The Public:** The public expects an excellent customer experience when they file a disability claim and interact with Federal and State employees.

**Disability Determination Services (DDS):** DDSs are Federally funded State agencies that process initial disability and disability reconsideration claims.

**Claimant Advocacy and Disability Advocacy Organizations:** These organizations advocate for the rights of the disabled and individuals who apply for disability.

**Congress:** Congress maintains an interest in efficient service delivery options for the public such as phone, face-to-face, and online services.