# Improve Initial Disability Claims

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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.[1]

- 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)[2] 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.

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[1] This target is also a budgeted workload measure.
[2] In FY 2023, customers are waiting over seven months on average for an initial disability determination.

# Goal Overview

What Success Looks Like[3]

- Reduced time customers wait to receive initial disability claims decisions.[4]

- 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.

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[3] 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.
[4] It will take a multi-year effort and adequate funding to reduce the average initial disability claims wait times.

# Goal Target(s)

| Achievement statement | | Key indicator(s) | Quantify progress | | | Frequency |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Repeat the achievement statement from the goal statement on the previous slide | | A "key performance indicator" measures progress toward a goal target | These values enable us (and you!) to calculate % complete for any type of target | | | 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[5] | 164 days | 165[6] | 218 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%[7] | 97% | Monthly |
| | | Initial Disability Claims Productivity Per Workyear[8] | Not Applicable | 208 | 212 | Monthly |

\* FY 2021 actual data.

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[5] Our FY 2023 Congressional Operating Plan includes planned performance based on our FY 2023 appropriation.  Please visit www.ssa.gov/budget for more information.

[6] Average Processing Time (APT) resets at the beginning of each fiscal year.  Our FY 2022 annual average APT was 184 days.

[7] 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.

[8] 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**

**Linda Kerr-Davis**, *Assistant Deputy Commissioner, Office of Operations*
Goal Leader

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

**Implementation Team**

*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*

# 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.
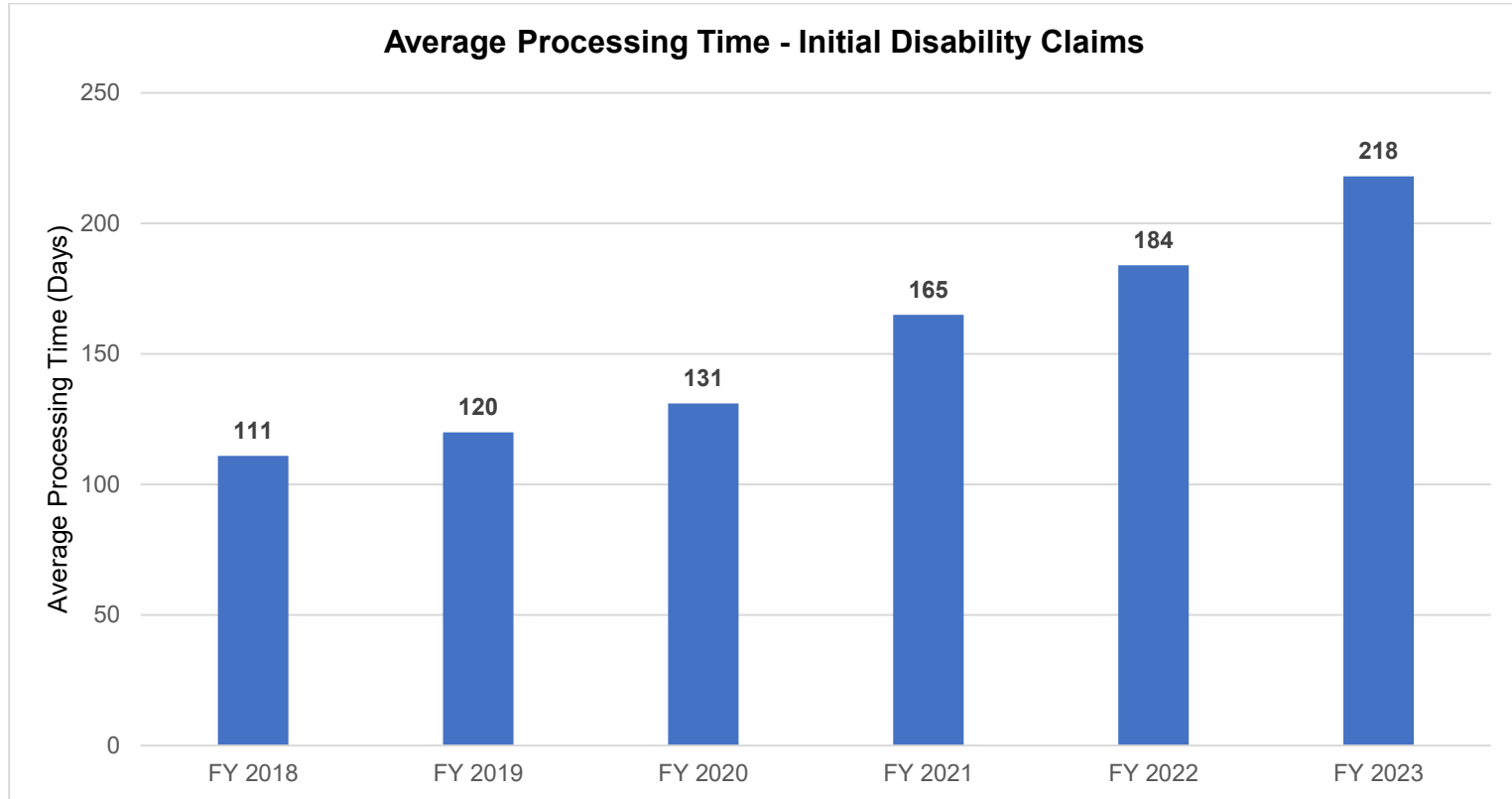
# Goal Strategies

**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 the decade prior to the pandemic, between 2009 and 2019, DDS overall attrition ranged between 9.2 and 12.4 percent while disability examiner attrition ranged between 12.2 and 16.9 percent.  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 17.6 percent, and the disability examiner attrition rate was 24.6 percent, both of which are the highest rates in over 20 years.  In FY 2023, the final overall DDS staff attrition rate was 13.9 percent, and the disability examiner attrition rate was 19.7 percent.

- The DDSs are experiencing difficulties with recruitment and retention to maintain staffing levels.

- There were ongoing delays during the pandemic 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 processing medical continuing disability 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.
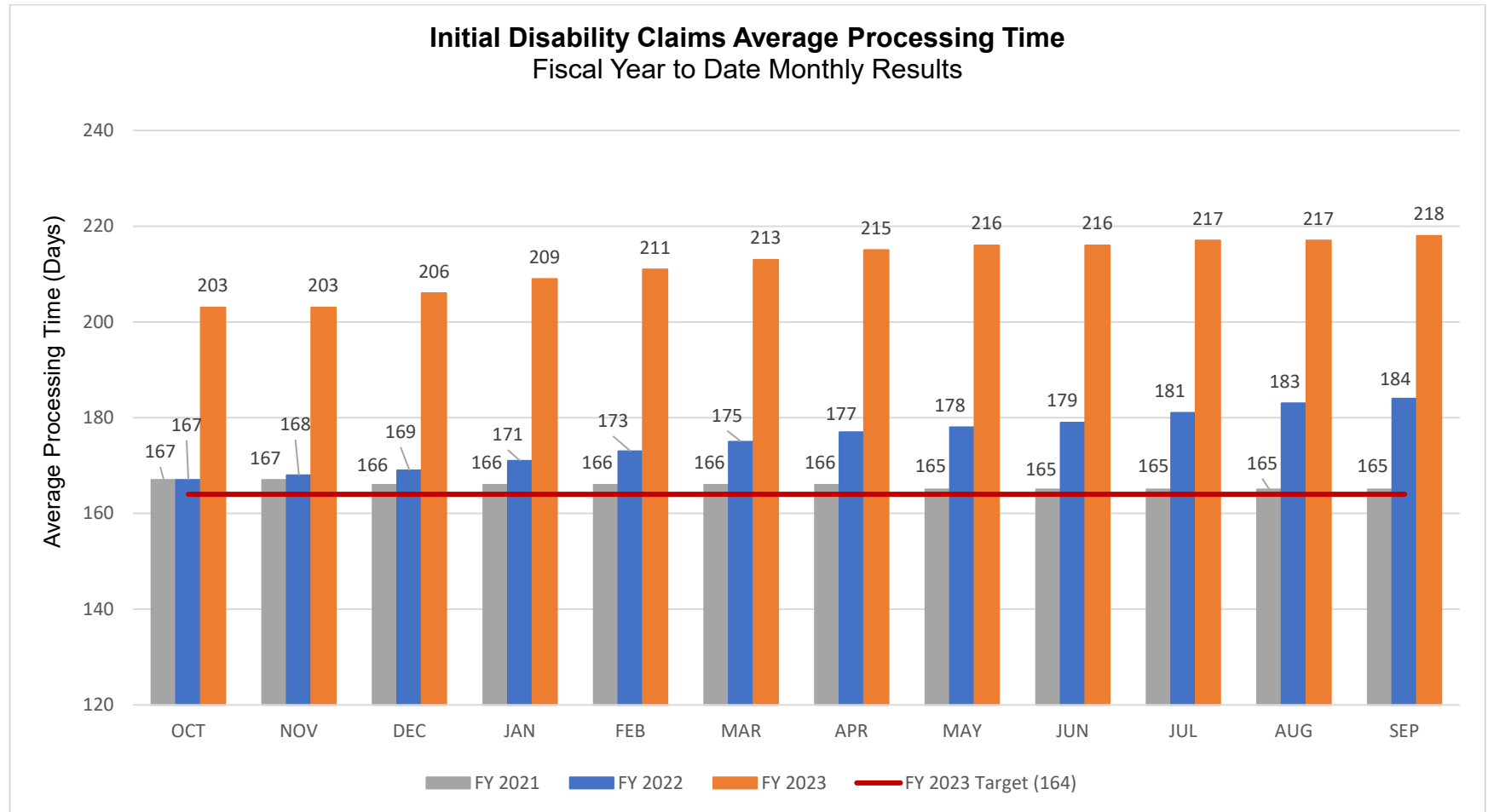
# Key Indicators

**Primary Indicator (historical):**  Initial Disability Claims Average Processing Time[9]



**Average Processing Time - Initial Disability Claims**

| FY 2018 | FY 2019 | FY 2020 | FY 2021 | FY 2022 | FY 2023 |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 111 | 120 | 131 | 165 | 184 | 218 |

Y-axis: Average Processing Time (Days)

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[9]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.
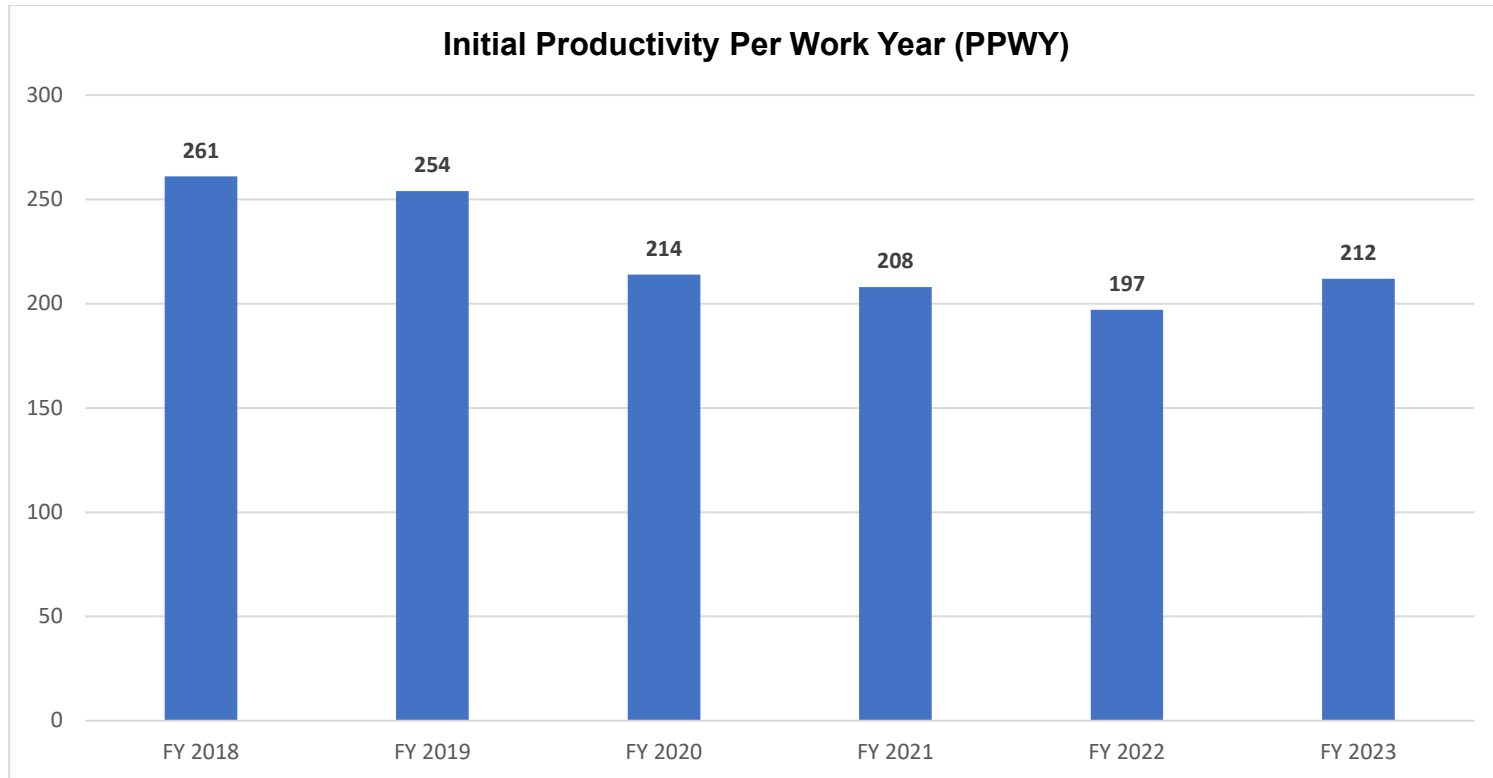
# Key Indicators

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



**Initial Disability Claims Average Processing Time**
Fiscal Year to Date Monthly Results

Y-axis: Average Processing Time (Days)

| Month | FY 2021 | FY 2022 | FY 2023 |
|-------|---------|---------|---------|
| OCT | 167 | 167 | 203 |
| NOV | 167 | 168 | 203 |
| DEC | 166 | 169 | 206 |
| JAN | 166 | 171 | 209 |
| FEB | 166 | 173 | 211 |
| MAR | 166 | 175 | 213 |
| APR | 166 | 177 | 215 |
| MAY | 165 | 178 | 216 |
| JUN | 165 | 179 | 216 |
| JUL | 165 | 181 | 217 |
| AUG | 165 | 183 | 217 |
| SEP | 165 | 184 | 218 |

Legend: FY 2021, FY 2022, FY 2023, FY 2023 Target (164)

# Key Indicators

**Secondary Indicator:** DDS Initial Disability Claims Productivity per Workyear[10]

**Initial Productivity Per Work Year (PPWY)**

| FY | PPWY |
|----|------|
| FY 2018 | 261 |
| FY 2019 | 254 |
| FY 2020 | 214 |
| FY 2021 | 208 |
| FY 2022 | 197 |
| FY 2023 | 212 |

[10] 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 Met | We continue to face challenges recruiting, hiring, and retaining staff.  We also continue to focus on improving processing time for both aged and all claims. |
| Decide 70 percent of pending initial disability claims that began FY 2023 180 days old or older | Q2, FY 2023 | Met | |
| Prioritize the most aged initial claims while maintaining an average processing time at or below 171 days | Q3, FY 2023 | Not Met | We continue to face challenges recruiting, hiring, and retaining staff.  We also continue to focus on improving processing time for both aged and all claims. |
| Decide 80 percent of pending initial disability claims that began FY 2023 180 days old or older | Q3, FY 2023 | Met | |
| Prioritize the most aged initial claims while maintaining an average processing time at or below 164 days | Q4, FY 2023 | Not Met | We continue to face challenges recruiting, hiring, and retaining staff.  We also continue to focus on improving processing time for both aged and all claims. |
| Decide 85 percent of pending initial disability claims that began FY 2023 180 days old or older | Q4, FY 2023 | Met | |

# Narrative – FY 2023 Q4

We set an ambitious APG target to improve the average processing time (APT) for initial disability claims and to work down older cases. The APT for initial disability claims was 218 days at the end of FY 2023, which was significantly greater than our goal of 164 days, and 34 days higher than our FY 2022 annual average processing time of 184 days. While we did not achieve our goal, we continue to prioritize these efforts. By the end of the FY 2023, we decided 365,215 (about 97 percent) of the 377,280 initial claims that started the year 180 days old or older, surpassing our goal of 85 percent.

We acknowledge that it is unacceptable for individuals to wait over seven months to receive a disability decision. Our priority is to mitigate further increases in average processing time for initial claims and continue prioritizing the most aged claims awaiting a decision. To help us address the challenges resulting in increased wait times, we established a special team dedicated to increasing DDS processing capacity and reducing claims backlogs.

The most significant factor contributing to the increases in APT and the volume of aged claims pending in FY 2023 was the continued challenge for DDSs to recruit, hire, and retain their staff, although we began to see improvement in Q3 and Q4 of FY 2023. With hiring coming in above expectations at the end of FY 2023, the DDSs increased total staff on-duty by over 700 compared to FY 2022. At the same time, overall staffing and disability examiner attrition improved to 13.9% and 19.7%, respectively, but remain above historical averages. Some of the staffing challenges can be attributed to macroeconomic conditions adversely impacting all employers, while some can be attributed to DDS-specific challenges. We have found that low starting wages compared to comparable positions in the market, the complexity of learning the job, and the lack of qualified candidates applying for the positions affect our DDSs in particular. We are committed to working

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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
- Updating Training Practices

Actions we took through Q4 included:

- Increased disability case processing capacity by implementing support cadres of SSA employees from other areas of our organization and experienced re-employed annuitants.
- Implemented a new national marketing campaign and training initiatives to address DDS recruitment and retention challenges.
- Engaged with State DDS Administrators to improve recruitment and retention at the State level.

We are continuing to prioritize reducing the time for initial disability decisions going forward.  Though we continue to anticipate that staffing challenges will remain, we will continue to focus on reducing processing time and prioritizing decisions for those who have waited the longest.  We will also continue to balance our workloads between completing our initial disability claims and completing the medical continuing disability reviews supported through our dedicated funding.

# 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 the time the case was with a 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 organization's size. 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.