

Speeding Up Your Social Security Claim

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Getting Social Security to make a decision on a claim for disability has never been a rapid process, however, it is now taking even longer. Claims for disability have increased dramatically, but the staff at Social Security has not.

In addition, Social Security contracts with each state to provide a Disability Determination Department that reviews and decides the medical eligibility of applicants. As states try to balance their budgets during this recession, many of those departments have suffered staffing shortages and unpaid furlough days, even though the federal government reimburses the states in full for those departments

Because of this increased volume, short staff, and budget restrictions, it is taking longer and longer for a disability claim to go through the process to the point that it is not uncommon in some regions for an initial disability claim to take six months or more from initial interview to final decision.

Is it possible to reduce the processing time? While there is no formal "fast track" system, there is a lot you, the claimant, can do to make sure your claim doesn't get stuck and continues through the system as quickly as possible often cutting months off the timeline.

Start the Applications Online. Social Security has greatly improved the online filing system. No longer does your claim just vanish and go to some unknown central processing system. Now, once you submit the two online disability forms, they go directly to your nearest Social Security office for processing.

The two initial forms can be completed online, both the Application for Disability and the Disability Reports, one for adults and one for children. They are available at <http://www.ssa.gov/>; follow the links. The forms are quite user friendly. Completing the forms online also gives you the opportunity to save your work before submitting it so you can take a break, look up some information, or complete them over a period of days.

Go for an In-Person Interview. Once you have submitted the online forms, call Social Security at 800-772-1213 and make an appointment to go into your local district office for the initial interview. This will give you the opportunity to meet the representative assigned to track your claim through processing, and to get

his or her direct phone number. It also allows you to bring any documents that Social Security needs to see without worrying about losing them in the mail.

Because you have already entered all the information on line, this initial interview is usually very brief, usually just to review the information you submitted and get your assurance that the documents are accurate to your best knowledge.

Take Your Medical Records with You. The one thing that slows down the processing of claims the most is the analyst requesting and waiting to receive copies of your medical records from your treating physicians. Because of the analysts' work load, they can only send the request to your doctors and then wait a month or so to see if they are returned before requesting them again. If you can provide all your medical records at the initial interview, you are greatly reducing the time your claim just sits and waits.

It is not always easy to collect your medical records; however, it can be worthwhile to get your claim processed faster. Some doctors may attempt to charge you for the records; although if asked, they will often waive the fee if they know you are using them to apply for Social Security. If they insist on charging, you will need to decide whether it is worth it to reduce the processing time.

If you do submit your medical records at the initial interview, you will need to make a photocopy of them. It is not uncommon for records and other paper documents to get lost between the Social Security office and the state agency that actually reviews them. This seems to occur more often as Social Security moves to paperless files.

If You Can't Take the Medical Records with You. If you choose not to submit medical records with your initial claim, you should get the name and phone number of the analyst processing your claim. Your representative at Social Security will be able to provide these once your claim is assigned to an analyst.

You can contact the analyst to find out when and from which doctors the records were requested. Follow up with each doctor to confirm they got the request and ask them when they will be sent. If they haven't received the request, get the doctor's fax number and ask the analyst to fax the request.

You should continue to work as the go-between and make sure the requests are received by the doctor, the records are sent from the doctor, and the records are received by the analyst.

Because of the analyst's workload, it may be difficult to speak directly with the analyst, however your communication can be accomplished using the analyst's voice mail. Don't lose patience if they are slow to respond. You want to be perceived as helpful not nagging.

Complete Questionnaires Promptly. Once your claim is received by the analyst, you will often be sent a packet of questionnaires to complete. Usually this will include a questionnaire on how you function with your symptoms as well as some specialized questionnaires based on your diagnoses, such as questionnaires that focus on pain, fatigue, mental/psychological, neurological, etc.

The most common questionnaires you will receive are:

- **Function Report – Adult (SSA-3373-BK)**(One is available for children as well) – This gives you an opportunity to describe what problems you have doing everyday activities, how you shop, how you get around, how your social life has been affected, how you do household chores. Don't give short answers; explain thoroughly how your condition has caused you to change how you are able to function.
- **Function Report – Third Party (SSA-3380-BK)** – This is similar to the 3373 form but needs to be filled out by a third party who knows about your condition and how you function. You should let the person complete it without your assistance.
- **Work History Report (SSA-3369-BK)** – If you completed your initial applications online, this form should not be completed as the online form lets you complete your work history. At present, however, this form is often automatically sent out in error.

The analyst will normally give you ten days to complete the questionnaires. While you should do your best to get it returned in that time, if you need an extension you can get it by calling the analyst, whose name and number will be in the cover letter

Fax the Questionnaires if Possible. You will have the choice of submitting completed questionnaires by mail or by fax, using a cover sheet with a bar code. Faxing will enter the questionnaire directly into your electronic file at Social Security for instant availability to the analyst. Mailed questionnaires must be scanned into the computer which slows down the processing.

One Don't. Contacting your Congress member does not help when first filing a claim. That should remain as a last result if the claim should get stalled and is not moving at all.

While the process of applying for disability with Social Security moves slowly, by following these tips and periodically checking with your analyst to make sure he/she has everything they need to make a decision, you can cut the processing time, often dramatically.