

2008 Presidential Election—Please Vote!

Important Voter Information

The U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) is an independent, bipartisan commission created by the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002. One of the EAC's primary mandates under the HAVA is to serve as a central resource for information about elections. Through the EAC's national clearinghouse, the public can find information about topics such as registering to vote, serving as a poll worker, contact information for each state election office, and studies about how, where and when we vote. The EAC also is responsible for maintaining the National Mail Voter Registration form, which can be used in any state to register to vote in a federal election. For more information, go to www.eac.gov/voter.

Conventions

After the primaries and caucuses (meetings of supporters or members of a political party) are over, each political party holds a convention where their presidential and vice presidential nominees are formally selected. Democrats will meet in Denver, CO, Aug. 25–28, 2008.

Republicans will meet in Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN, Sept. 1–4, 2008.

Electoral College

Election day is Nov. 4, 2008. Although polls across the country are open on one day, the election is not a national poll but a series of 51 state-level elections that decide the members of the Electoral College. Technically, voters aren't choosing a candidate but a slate of electors who have pledged to vote for that candidate when the Electoral College meets. The candidate who wins the most votes in each state normally wins all of that state's electoral votes. With 538 electors up for grabs, the candidate with more than half—270—wins the presidency. The number of electors from each state equals the number of senators and representatives the state sends to Congress. If no candidate receives 270 electors, the House of Representatives decides who the next president will be.

The Electoral College meets in December to formalize the election, although the results are usually known soon after the election, and preparations already have begun for a presidential transition (if necessary) and the inaugural ceremony on the Capitol steps on Jan. 20.

FDA Appoints Coté to Head Orphan Products Development Office

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has named Timothy Coté, M.D., M.P.H., as the new director of the FDA's Office of Orphan Products Development. Dr. Coté will be responsible for promoting the development of products that demonstrate promise for the diagnosis or treatment of rare diseases or conditions. Dr. Coté's experience ranges from medical epidemiology to clinical research.

Dr. Coté, a captain in the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, most recently served as the Centers for Disease Control's country director for the African nation of Rwanda. In Rwanda, he directed programs on HIV/AIDS, malaria and avian influenza, and was responsible for scientific and administrative leadership in patient care and research initiatives. He also oversaw the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief operations in Rwanda. Under his leadership, the numbers of HIV-infected individuals receiving anti-retroviral medications from the United States rose from 20,000 to 55,000 persons.

by
Sissi Langford,
chair, Committee on
Federal Legislation
and
Kym Wigglesworth,
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NORD Conference

Sissi Langford and Kym Wigglesworth attended the National Organization for Rare Diseases' (NORD) annual conference in Rockville, MD, Sep. 28-30. The conference offered a diverse selection of sessions such as bioethics and rare disease research, legal issues for non-profits, creating and maintaining a patient registry, and internationalism and other trends in developing diagnostics and treatments for rare diseases.

We also learned of significant changes being made at the Social Security Administration (SSA) with regard to disability benefits. Michael Astrue, former CEO of Transkaryotic Therapies and recently appointed commissioner of the SSA, spoke of a new initiative to simplify the disability determination process for the Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income programs.

Commissioner Astrue testified before Congress in May 2007 regarding his new plan:

"There are four areas which I believe hold the most promise to eliminate the hearings backlogs: compassionate allowances; improving hearing procedures; increasing adjudicatory capacity; and increasing efficiency with automation and business processes. Other course corrections at SSA include reorganizing the Office of Disability and Income Support Programs to better align our organizational structure with our mission of dedicated service to Americans with disabilities."

The compassionate allowances provision will be significant to Society members and their families. The SSA plans to designate certain diseases as "automatic qualifiers" for social security benefits. Currently, rare diseases are not included. The SSA is using an advisory committee model to determine which rare diseases will qualify for compassionate allowances. The Legislative Committee is participating in this process and advocating for the inclusion of MPS and related diseases. We will keep you informed of our progress. Please read below for information on this important initiative.

Statement of Michael J. Astrue

Commissioner of Social Security

Testimony before the Senate Finance Committee

May 23, 2007

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to share our plans to reduce the backlog of disability claims.

As you are well aware, a major challenge that faces our agency is the disability determination process for the Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income programs. For more than half of a century, Social Security has helped disabled workers and their families cope with the loss of income due to a severe disability. Unfortunately, many of today's applicants face an uphill battle simply to get a hearing before an Administrative Law Judge (ALJ). For some, the long wait for their day in court leads to homelessness and the loss of family and friends. Sadly, people have died waiting for a hearing.

As you know, our disability programs have grown significantly over the last five years and will continue to do so at an increasing rate as aging baby boomers reach their most disability-prone years. At the same time, Congress has added new and non-traditional workloads to SSA's responsibilities while appropriating on average about \$150 million less each year than the president has requested since 2001. As a result, the agency is struggling to balance its new responsibilities and its traditional work within tight resource constraints.

So it should be no surprise that the problems associated with the disability determination process are also stressing our network of field offices. Increasingly crowded waiting rooms, loss of staff and unaddressed workloads are a direct result of the growing backlogs. This situation is unacceptable.

When I appeared before you at my confirmation hearing, I promised to report back to you with my recommendations for reducing these backlogs and prevent them from recurring.

2008 Primaries/ Caucuses Calendar as of 15 Oct 07

See CNN.com for more information.

Early Primaries/Caucuses

Jan 5: Wyoming Rep caucuses

Jan 14: Iowa caucuses

Jan 15: Michigan primary

Jan 19: Nevada caucuses
South Carolina Rep primary

Jan 22: New Hampshire primary

Jan 29: Florida primary
South Carolina Dem primary

Feb 1: Maine Rep caucuses

Super Tuesday: February 5

Alabama Dem primary
Alaska caucuses
Arizona primary
Arkansas primary
California primary
Colorado caucuses
Connecticut primary
Delaware primary
Georgia primary
Idaho Dem caucuses
Illinois primary
Kansas Dem caucuses
Minnesota caucuses
Missouri primary
New Jersey primary
New Mexico Dem primary
New York primary
North Dakota caucuses
Oklahoma primary
Tennessee primary
Utah primary
W. Virginia Rep convention
Montana Rep caucuses (prel)
North Carolina primary (prel)
Pennsylvania primary (prel)

Today, I want to make an initial report on our first 100 days. Our disability backlogs are a problem that I am determined to overcome. Many of you are aware that my interest in becoming commissioner was driven by both personal and professional interests. I handled my father's disability application when, at age 52, he suffered a severe cerebral brain hemorrhage caused by a rare form of brain cancer.

We are overdue for a change. The length of time many people wait for their final disability decision is unacceptable. I am committed to a process that is as fair and speedy as possible. Today, I want to share with you a number of important steps we have taken, will take, or are contemplating taking in the near future to better manage our workloads.

There are four areas which I believe hold the most promise to eliminate the hearings backlogs: compassionate allowances; improving hearing procedures; increasing adjudicatory capacity; and increasing efficiency with automation and business processes. Despite the fact that our ALJs are achieving a record high productivity rate, backlogs continue to grow. The current number of cases waiting for a hearing decision is about 738,000, leading to average waiting times of 505 days, the highest ever in SSA history. Pending hearings have doubled since 2001. In addition, the number of applications for disability benefits has been extraordinarily high throughout the first seven years of this decade, and, as mentioned earlier, funding has not kept up.

To provide more context, Congressional budget reductions below the president's request from 2002 through 2007 are equivalent to processing an additional 177,000 initial claims and an additional 454,000 hearings. I want to thank you for the funding included in the FY 2007 annual appropriation. Although attrition continues to reduce staffing levels, those funds allowed us to avert employee furloughs and hire a limited number of staff in critical areas. We thank the members of this committee for the support you gave us in obtaining these funds, and we very much need you to continue your advocacy effort on our behalf.

The success of the initiatives that I share with you today depends on timely and adequate agency funding. Properly funded, these initiatives will reduce the amount of time members of the public wait for a hearing decision and will lead to a reduction in the number of cases pending in our offices.

Compassionate Allowances

Attached to this testimony is additional information about our proposals to reduce the hearings backlogs and address the shortfalls of the disability determination process. We believe that these initiatives will have a significant impact on reducing backlogs.

One way to reduce the number of cases in the determination process is to use automation tools to screen cases. We have seen the success of the Quick Disability Determination (QDD) model currently in use in New England. This computer model identifies cases that are most likely to be allowed. To date, the New England states have decided 97 percent of these cases within the required 21 days and they have an average decision time of 11 days. About 85 percent of these cases have been allowed during the initial review, and more have been allowed with additional documentation. We plan to build on the success of the QDD because it is both efficient and compassionate for us to do so. To date, the majority of QDD cases are cancer cases because the model does not yet cull a wide enough variety of diseases. Currently, QDD cases constitute only 2.6 percent of our cases but we are committed to pushing the number of cases that can be decided through the model as high as we can possibly go while maintaining accuracy.

An added difficulty is that our examiners are working with outdated medical listings and poorly defined categories of disabilities. Many cases that should be resolved quickly are not being determined in a timely manner because many of our listings are outdated. To help us with this initiative, Secretary Leavitt has generously offered the assistance of the Department of Health and Human Services on a taskforce to jumpstart our effort to refine and update our rules.

2008 Primaries/ Caucuses Calendar

continued

February (other dates)

Feb 5–12: Democrats Abroad

Feb 9: Kansas Rep caucuses
Louisiana primary
Nebraska Dem caucuses
Virgin Islands Dem caucuses
Washington caucuses

Feb 10: Maine Dem caucuses

Feb 12: D.C. primary
Maryland primary
Virginia primary

Feb 19: Hawaii Dem caucuses
Washington Rep primary
Wisconsin primary

Feb 24: Puerto Rico primary

March

March 4: Massachusetts primary
Ohio primary
Rhode Island primary
Texas primary
Vermont primary

March 8: Wyoming Dem caucuses

March 10: American Samoa Dem caucuses

March 11: Mississippi primary

April

No primaries or caucuses scheduled.

Other course corrections at SSA include reorganizing the Office of Disability and Income Support Programs to better align our organizational structure with our mission of dedicated service to Americans with disabilities. We have already received helpful advice from the Office of Inspector General, which at my request, has completed a first draft of an organizational audit.

In addition, we found that two of the new electronic systems developed for Disability Determination Services (DDS) as part of the Disability Service Improvement initiative were not ready for real-world use, and were in fact causing considerable delays in processing caseloads. While one of these systems may have potential over the long term, they both have been pulled. We are instead focusing on refining our two primary systems that will make us fully electronic. To accomplish that goal, we have used an additional \$25 million from our technology reserve fund.

Improve Hearing Procedures

We have already begun to attack the problem of aged cases starting with the cases that are or will be 1,000 days old as of Sept. 30, 2007. I consider this initiative to be a moral imperative. An applicant should not have to wait three or four years for his or her day in court. We have established a goal of reducing these cases to a negligible level by the end of this fiscal year, and I am pleased to report that the number has already dropped from more than 63,000 on October 1 of last year to about 14,000 as of last week. We have made this progress by reallocating resources and redefining the metrics by which we measure success.

We are also studying the experiment of 1995–2000 that authorized Senior Attorney Advisors to issue fully favorable decisions. The Social Security Advisory Board has recommended this program. We will evaluate the lessons from this experiment for similar approaches we could adopt now to improve the disability determination process.

Read Commissioner Astrue's complete testimony at:
www.socialsecurity.gov/legislation/testimony_052307.htm

Read the addendum to his testimony at:
www.socialsecurity.gov/legislation/testimony_052307_addendum.htm

Social Security issued a final rule on Sept. 5, 2007, extending nationwide its QDD process. Under QDD, a predictive model analyzes specific elements of data within the electronic claims file to identify claims where there is a high potential that the claimant is disabled and where evidence of the person's allegations can be quickly and easily obtained. In New England, where the process was being tested, about 3 percent of all new cases were identified as QDD cases and processed in an average of 11 days. Today, Arizona, New Jersey and North Dakota have started using QDD as part of a staged national roll-out that will be completed early next year.

2008 Primaries/ Caucuses Calendar

continued

May/June

May 3: Guam Dem caucuses

May 6: Indiana primary

May 13: Nebraska primary
West Virginia primary

May 17: Hawaii Rep convention

May 20: Kentucky primary
Oregon primary

May 27: Idaho Rep primary

June 3: Montana Dem primary
New Mexico Rep primary
South Dakota primary

June 28: Nebraska Rep
convention

Legislative Committee

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