



News Release

SOCIAL SECURITY

Social Security Opens National Hearing Center

Center Will Help Speed Disability Decisions

Michael J. Astrue, Commissioner of Social Security, today announced that the agency's National Hearing Center (NHC) is open for business. The NHC is one of the many steps the agency has taken this year to address the backlog of disability cases at the hearing level. Chief Administrative Law Judge (ALJ) Frank Cristaudo presided over the first hearing from the NHC in Falls Church, Virginia using electronic video technology. The claimant and the claimant's representative took part in the hearing from a hearing office in Cleveland, Ohio.

"The National Hearing Center allows us to capitalize on new technologies such as electronic disability folders and video teleconferencing," Commissioner Astrue said. "The Center will give us needed flexibility to address the country's worst backlogs."

At present, the agency has allotted seven ALJs to the NHC. The NHC ALJs will initially hear cases for the Atlanta, Cleveland and Detroit hearing offices -- areas of the country where the wait for a hearing can be two years or more. Additional ALJs may be added over time to provide the NHC with the capability to assist more offices.

Social Security's backlog of disability cases is well documented. Currently, there are about 750,000 cases awaiting a hearing -- a number that has more than doubled in this decade. In May 2007, Commissioner Astrue presented Congress with a four part plan to address the backlog. His testimony is available at www.socialsecurity.gov/legislation/testimony_052307.htm.

"When it comes to addressing the disability backlog, there is no single magic bullet," Astrue said. "The National Hearing Center is another important step we can take to provide the American public with the service they deserve."

To view the agency's plan to reduce the hearings backlog, as well as current and planned initiatives to improve the disability process go to www.socialsecurity.gov/hearingsbacklog.pdf.

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