

## 8 Important SSA Events in 2021

On the heels of a year ravaged by a global pandemic, the Social Security Administration (SSA) spent 2021 continuing its services for the most vulnerable of populations. A Commissioner removed from his post, a historic Cost-of-Living Adjustment, and a severely mismanaged mail system are just a few of the stories coming out of Social Security this year. We have highlighted eight developments, changes, and events, which occurred this year, that you should know about.

### 1 Biden selects Kilolo Kijakazi to serve as acting commissioner.

In July 2021 news broke that Andrew Saul, Commissioner of the Social Security Administration, was removed from his role by President Joe Biden. Saul had been highly criticized throughout his term, dating back prior to the pandemic when he revoked SSA's long-standing work from home options for employees. As the pandemic hit, Saul was slow to react to inventory management issues, resulting in considerable backlogs at both the Initial and Reconsideration levels. President Biden's proposed budget for FY2022 reflects a 9.7% increase from 2021 levels to \$14.2B, with specific funding focused on addressing operational challenges and improving decision timing to correct some of the issues created under Saul's leadership. While the search for a new commissioner is completed, Kilolo Kijakazi was appointed as Acting Commissioner.

### 2 Legislation waives the waiting period for ALS patients.

In September 2019, the Stop the Wait Act was introduced into the House of Representatives to **eliminate the waiting period** for both Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits and entitlement to Medicare coverage as the result of an SSDI award. Currently, beneficiaries are required to wait five full calendar months from the date they are found to be disabled before receiving benefits, and an additional two years before receiving Medicare health insurance. While most beneficiaries are still subject to the waiting period before their eligibility begins, in the waning days of 2020, former President Donald Trump signed into law a bill that eliminates the waiting period for those who are diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS). For these claimants, it is a welcome relief that may help lessen the financial and medical burdens they and their families will face as they battle this disease. With this change, ALS beneficiaries become eligible for SSDI benefits and Medicare coverage the month immediately following their date of disability onset.

### 3 SSA organizes outreach to vulnerable populations.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, SSA launched a campaign to work with advocates and community-based organizations in connecting the country's most vulnerable populations, including individuals with low income, limited English proficiency, mental illness, or those facing homelessness, to vital services. While the pandemic has impacted everyone, Social Security recognized that there are certain populations who were more adversely affected when face-to-face assistance could not be provided. The efforts by Social Security assist people in safely gaining access to the information and services they need, with a specific emphasis on applying for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and SSDI benefits.

### 4 OIG issues a report on SSA management of mail during the pandemic.

In August 2021, the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) issued an **interim report** regarding the management of mail during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of the interim report posed a grim look at how mail operations have been managed since the SSA suspended most in-person services due to the burgeoning pandemic. OIG found that Social Security does not have or maintain a system of managing incoming, outgoing, or pending mail. The OIG also identified specific issues of concern including unprocessed applications for new or replacement Social Security cards, a backlog of remitted benefit checks, and hundreds of thousands of unattended-to, undeliverable pieces of mail.

### 5 SSA expands the Compassionate Allowances Program.

Acting Commissioner Kijakazi announced the addition of twelve conditions to the SSA's **Compassionate Allowances Conditions** list. Originally formed in 2008, the Compassionate Allowances program (CAL) identifies conditions so severe that they automatically meet SSA's definition of disability. Once identified, the decision-making process may be expedited to ensure a more timely release of benefits to individuals applying for either SSDI or SSI benefits. The conditions added to the list include five cancer impairments, six rare genetic disorders typically diagnosed during infancy, and the most common of adult muscular dystrophies.

### 6 Social Security Board of Trustees issues its annual report.

In August 2021, the Social Security Board of Trustees released its annual report on the long-term financial status of the Social Security Trust Funds. This year's report is notable for its significantly delayed release (the report is due by April 1st each year) and its content, which now projects the trust funds to be depleted sooner in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The retirement trust fund would support full benefits through 2033, one year earlier than reported last year, and then be able to pay 76% of scheduled benefits. They estimated the disability trust fund would support full benefits through 2057, eight years earlier than last year's estimate, at which time 91% of scheduled benefits would be payable.

### 7 SSA redesigns its *Statement*, available through the *my* Social Security portal.

Social Security introduced a new look and feel to the *Social Security Statement*, which is available to anyone with a *my* Social Security account. The statement provides users with the opportunity to see their earnings information as well as estimates of future benefits quickly and securely. Acting Commissioner Kijakazi was quoted as saying, "the streamlined *Social Security Statement* contains clear messaging and makes it easier to find information at a glance, helping to simplify our complex programs for the public."

### 8 SSA announces a 5.9% COLA benefit increase for 2022.

In October 2021, Social Security announced a historic 5.9 percent Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) for all Social Security and SSI beneficiaries. This adjustment gives over 64 million Americans an increase in their December 2021 payments, payable in January 2022. An additional 8 million SSI benefit recipients will see their benefits increase starting December 31, 2021. The increase was the largest in decades; the last time the increase exceeded 5.9 percent was 1982. Since 2011, the COLA has not exceeded 3.6 percent.

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