

8 Ways the Pandemic has Impacted SSDI Claims

The COVID-19 pandemic has sparked countless policy changes since March of 2020. Many initial pandemic response efforts implemented by medical offices and government agencies have since been updated or replaced by new regulations, but the impact of the pandemic is ongoing. This includes the many ways the pandemic has impacted SSDI claims, from increased wait times to the way claims are adjudicated, and all parties involved in the SSDI claims process have had to adapt so claims can continue being processed. We've compiled this list of 8 noteworthy ways the pandemic has impacted SSDI claims to help you learn more about current trends, and what we anticipate in the future.

1 Telemedicine has impacted how medical evidence is evaluated

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has been a significant increase in virtual healthcare visits, as high-risk individuals seek to avoid potential COVID-19 exposure and many medical offices continue to limit in-person appointments if they are not deemed necessary. This shift in the way healthcare is being provided has also impacted the medical record evaluation process for disability examiners, as telemedicine records cannot cite direct physical evidence that is normally derived from an in-person exam. Therefore, examiners have needed to adjust their expectations and evaluate claims differently in order to come to a fair conclusion about whether to award or deny a claim. While this change may complicate things for examiners, it has been positive for claimants who struggle travelling to a doctor's office, as the convenience of telemedicine allows them to have more frequent visits with their provider.

2 The recent increase in unemployment benefit payments provides insight into SSDI claim trends

Unemployment rates reached historic levels in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, and job displacement remains a serious problem for many individuals nationwide. While this naturally led to a surge in unemployment claims, particularly in the first year or so of the pandemic, SSDI claim numbers have also increased over time due to health and financial struggles exacerbated by the pandemic. Historically, there has been a direct correlation between the national unemployment rate and the number of SSDI applications filed, and Social Security's actuaries are projecting an increase in 2022. This could prove challenging for individuals applying for both unemployment and SSDI benefits, as the criteria for these programs are quite different. Unemployment benefits are paid on the assumption that an individual can work, but is jobless and struggling to find employment, while SSDI claims are filed based on the assertion that one is unable to perform work at a substantially gainful level.

3 Claimants without representation may face additional obstacles

While claimants who work with a professional representative like Brown & Brown Absence Services Group depend on their representative for ongoing management of their claim, many claimants who apply for SSDI benefits without representation rely heavily on Social Security for assistance with their application. Before the pandemic, these individuals would often, if physically able, visit their local Social Security field office to have a sit-down appointment with a representative who would help them begin their application form and file an initial claim. Due to the widespread closure of Social Security offices to the public, as well as decreased resources in many parts of the country, unrepresented claimants had to take on a much larger role in managing a complex and unfamiliar process.

4 Application processing times have changed

Claimants have been experiencing longer wait times at the early levels of the SSDI application process since the pandemic began. SSA has not been able to effectively manage claim inventory and keep pace with the workload, which is largely due to their remote work environment. SSA sent large volumes of claims to Work Support Units throughout the country in effort to help mitigate the backlog many state offices were facing in the early months of the pandemic. Unfortunately, many Work Support Units soon become overwhelmed, and so claims remained untouched and were later transferred back to their state offices for processing, causing additional delays. The slowdown at the Initial and Reconsideration levels still needs to be remedied, as these increased wait times are not only increasing stress for claimants, but also delaying access to their benefits.

5 Conducting consultative exams is more difficult for many claimants

Initially due to office closures and a shortage of available physicians, and now due to lingering anxiety felt by many high-risk claimants about COVID exposure, the number of consultative exams being conducted for SSDI claims has significantly declined since March of 2020. When the pandemic began, a mandate was issued to halt all consultative exams. This caused many claims to sit untouched for months as they waited for these exams to take place, while others were ultimately adjudicated without sufficient medical information. SSA made efforts to transition some consultative exams to virtual appointments, but frequent technology challenges and security protocols led to disappointing results.

6 Medical records may take longer to obtain

Similar to the way pandemic protocols have influenced the decrease in consultative exams being conducted, operational changes in many medical offices have increased wait times for receiving medical records in support of SSDI claims. Many offices have been impacted by staffing shortages, reduced hours, and increased volume due to COVID-19. The delays currently seen at many offices nationwide could seriously impact claim decision timelines as well as file preparation when awaiting an SSDI hearing. This has placed a greater emphasis on submitting medical record requests as soon as possible to ensure that Administrative Law Judges have a comprehensive file to review when issuing hearing decisions.

7 The SSDI hearing experience has evolved considerably

At the start of the pandemic, SSA transitioned to conducting phone hearings only, though they have since added the option for claimants to participate in video hearings by using Microsoft Teams. While this may be a welcome change for some claimants whose conditions make it difficult for them to leave the house or interact with others, many claimants who would prefer the opportunity to present their claim in person may be frustrated by not having this opportunity. On a positive note, the ability to participate in hearings from home has generally increased claimant availability, and therefore led to an overall decline in the number of hearings being postponed due to claimant requests. However, remote hearings have also created a unique problem where hearings aren't always able to be completed as scheduled due to technology challenges.

8 Delayed award letters may lead to confusion and financial anxiety

In addition to the slowdown SSA has been working through at the initial claim level, pandemic strains have also caused delays in the processing of claimant award letters, known as Notices of Award, for claims with favorable outcomes. As a result of these delays on the back end of the process, claimants may receive their retroactive awards (typically received as lump sum deposits in their bank accounts) long before their actual award notifications arrive. This could prove particularly problematic for unrepresented claimants, who might spend the money to pay bills or cover other key expenses, not remembering or realizing that they have any reimbursement obligations. In addition to providing claimants with advice on what to do when their award is received, professional representatives continue to remind their clients of their reimbursement obligations, and may also offer services to facilitate these transactions, thus alleviating a potential source of anxiety as they receive their long-awaited awards.

Have questions? We can help.

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