

BALTIMORE BREAKING NEWS



Social Security disability backlog in Md. among highest in nation

Email Facebook 17 Twitter 12 11



BY JOHN FRITZE, THE BALTIMORE SUN

Social Security to end decades-old letter service

By John Fritze, The Baltimore Sun

Updated June 2, 2014

The Social Security Administration office that reviews disability claims for Central Maryland has the third-longest processing delay in the nation — a backlog that prompted a member of the state's congressional delegation on Monday to call for action.

Disability claimants with appeals at the Baltimore office wait an average of 17 months for a hearing, agency data show. That's longer than in New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and more than 150 other offices.

In Chicago, by comparison, the average wait time is one year. Only the offices in Miami and Fort Myers, Fla., have longer waits.

"That's unacceptable," said Rep. C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger. The Baltimore County Democrat demanded Monday that the agency draw up a plan to address the delays.

"Some have had to file for bankruptcy, some have lost their homes, some have even died before getting a penny of the benefits they were entitled to," he said.

The disability claims backlog, a long-standing problem for the Woodlawn-based agency, has been the subject of several hearings on Capitol Hill. The agency has taken some steps to address the issue, but officials say budget cuts imposed by Congress have exacerbated the problem.

Ruppersberger drew a comparison to the developing scandal at Department of Veterans Affairs health facilities. VA Secretary Eric Shinseki stepped down from that agency last week amid outrage over the long waits for medical care experienced by some veterans.

Ruppersberger said it was "way too soon" to call for similar changes in leadership at Social Security.

A spokeswoman for the Social Security Administration said the agency reduced wait times across the system significantly from 2007 to 2011, dropping the average delay in Baltimore to just over a year.

"Over the past three years, though, we received an average of nearly a billion dollars less each year than what the president requested for our administrative budget," spokeswoman LaVenja J. LaVelle said in a statement.

Consequently, she said, the average waiting time increased.

"Nonetheless, we continue to seek ways to ensure the public served by the Baltimore hearing office waits no longer than necessary," she added. "We have enlisted the assistance of other offices to hear and decide thousands of Baltimore cases over the past year."

Agency data show there are 11,530 cases pending in the Baltimore office, up 26 percent from 9,110 two years ago. That represents the fifth-largest backlog in the country.

Three years ago, the Social Security Administration anticipated it would reduce the national disability backlog to 525,000 by the current fiscal year. But the agency's inspector general reported in April that the goal was unrealistic. The inspector general estimated the agency might be able to reduce the number of pending claims to 668,127.

Brian Landsman is one of those caught up in the backlog. The 35-year-old Reisterstown man was diagnosed in 2010 with epilepsy, which he says caused severe seizures that interrupted his work in sales. After repeated attempts to work through his condition were unsuccessful, he says, he applied for disability in January 2013. He is waiting for a hearing.

Landsman and his wife have a 15-month-old son. She is working as a hairstylist and at a day care. Landsman is now filing for bankruptcy.

"It's beyond frustrating," he said. "It's just been impossible for me to hold a job."

More than 12 million disabled workers, spouses and children received the benefits in 2012, up from 7.5 million in 2000. The average monthly benefit is \$1,130.

Social Security, which serves nearly 57 million beneficiaries in all, has been operating without a confirmed commissioner since Michael J. Astrue left early last year and the White House has declined to say when — or whether — President Barack Obama will nominate a replacement.

Acting Commissioner Carolyn W. Colvin, a former Maryland state official, has received praise for leading the agency through a period of cuts ordered by Congress, but some observers say the agency would be better served by a permanent leader confirmed by the Senate.

An individual claiming a disability goes through an initial review process that can take six months to a year. During the past decade, the number awarded benefits after that process has averaged less than 30 percent.

Those in Central Maryland who are denied then wait an average of 17 months for a hearing — the delay that Ruppersberger called unacceptable.

Claimants who are denied disability after the hearing may seek a review of the decision from the agency's Appeals Council — a process that can take another year.

Ruppersberger said he understands the budget constraints that have forced agencies across the federal government to make do with less. But he said he wants to know why Baltimore has fallen behind the national average.

The lawmaker said he sent Colvin a letter late last month on the issue. He was joined at a news conference Monday by several constituents who said they were dealing with delays.

Matthew Backus also suffered from seizures and then had a stroke about three years ago. The 49-year-old said one seizure caused him to lose control of his van in 2011 and plow into a dump truck at 70 miles per hour.

The Brooklyn man, a former security worker, said he has filed for bankruptcy and now is getting by on welfare and food stamps. He said his sister has taken money from her retirement savings to pay his doctors' bills.

Backus said he was denied disability benefits because the Social Security Administration found that he was capable of working. He said he applied for an emergency hearing last June.

He said he expects to receive one today.

"It's been a very, very long road," Backus said. "I've lost everything that I've worked my whole life for."

john.fritze@baltsun.com