Good Practices in Social Security

Good practice in operation since: 2017

Video Service Delivery

A case of the Social Security Administration

Social Security Administration
United States
Summary

As the baby boom generation (people born in 1946 through 1965) reached their most disability-prone years, the number of claims and subsequent appeals for disability benefits skyrocketed. This strained the United States Social Security Administration’s ability (SSA) to keep pace with the demand for hearings. A hearing is a proceeding before an administrative law judge requested by a claimant when he or she disagrees with a determination SSA has made. SSA has made use of video conferencing technology as a means of meeting this challenge.

The issue or challenge

What was the issue or challenge addressed by your good practice? Please provide a short description.

In recent years, the SSA has endeavoured to deliver a world-class customer service experience by expanding the use of video technology to hold hearings. A hearing is a proceeding before an administrative law judge requested by a claimant when he or she disagrees with a determination SSA has made.

Some of our customers live in areas with limited public transportation and have difficulty getting to our field offices. Additionally, many of our customers have limited means, and traveling to hearings locations can be expensive. Video service delivery allows us to provide services to our customers at convenient third-party sites, such as hospitals, libraries, community centers, American Indian tribal centers, and homeless shelters. Video services reduce time and costs for traveling to remote locations. Often, we can schedule a video hearing faster than an in-person hearing.

Addressing the challenge

What were the main objectives of the plan or strategy to resolve the issue or challenge? List and briefly describe the main elements of the plan or strategy, focusing especially on their innovative feature(s) and expected or intended effects.

In our effort to increase the availability of video service delivery, our overarching goal has always been to update systems and infrastructure to improve the quality of video hearings. Doing so will improve customer satisfaction and willingness to participate in remote hearings via video.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2013, we provided 20 video units for Disability Determination Services (DDS) offices, allowing them to conduct video disability hearings and video consultative exams. Additionally, we installed 20 video units in other third party sites to assist disabled U.S. military veterans and reduce our travel expenses.

Due to the aging U.S. population, an increasing share of the workforce currently faces a reduced capacity to perform work due to a disability. To meet the challenge of a projected increase in disability hearing workloads, we are relocating 35 existing video units to offices where there is a greater need. In FY 2014, and into FY 2015, we expanded video service delivery by an additional 133 desktop units to increase our capacity for conducting video
hearings, expanding video remote interpreting services and video support for other work efforts. In the years going forward, we plan to continue to analyze the benefits of video service delivery and, wherever possible, explore more cost efficient technology.

The effectiveness of video service delivery expansion relies in large part on our customers' acceptance of it. Accordingly, we planned to increase marketing and educational information available to the public about our video service delivery and its tangible benefits. Further, as technology improves and remote video conferencing becomes increasingly viable, we continue to pursue policy and business process changes to maximize efficiency.

Ensuring that the quality of video service delivery is a world-class experience for our customers will allow the future expansion of this initiative.

**Targets to be achieved**

*What were the quantitative and/or qualitative targets or key performance indicators that were set for the plan or strategy? Please describe briefly.*

We use video conferencing technology to help us balance workloads across the country, reduce travel for the public and our employees, and better serve remote areas.

Our National Hearing Centers give us needed flexibility to support quickly the hearing offices with the largest hearing backlogs. Video technology reduces the need for our staff to travel between offices and to remote sites to hold hearings, which saves travel costs and frees more time for our judges to decide cases. Video conferencing also provides an efficient and innovative way to provide service to segments of the public with unique service needs. For example, we offer video hearings services in American Indian Tribal Centers and Veterans Administration hospitals to provide service in those locations.

We planned to expand video service delivery to conduct 28 per cent of disability hearings by FY 2014, and 30 per cent by FY 2015.

**Evaluating the results**

*Has there been an evaluation of the good practice? Please provide data on the impact and outcomes of the good practice by comparing targets vs actual performance, before-and-after indicators, and/or other types of statistics or measurements.*

We have held over one million video hearings to date, and we continue to increase our video hearing capacity each year. Video hearings play a critical role in our disability adjudication process by enabling some claimants to participate in a hearing nearer their homes.

We conduct video hearings in hearing offices, permanent remote sites, claimant-only sites inside field offices, National Hearing Centers, and through select representatives participating in the Representative Video Project. Video hearings allow our administrative law judges to spend less time traveling to hearings and more time hearing and deciding cases. Additionally, we are able to balance our hearings workloads by electronically transferring cases to offices that have shorter wait times.
We met our FY 2014 target. We continued to improve service delivery by expanding access to video hearings, surpassing our goal by more than 25,000 video hearings. The percentage of hearings performed remotely has remained around 28 per cent. Nonetheless, from FY 2008 through FY 2013, we have increased the number of video hearings we performed by over 220 per cent (from 55,869 in FY 2008 to 179,308 in FY 2013). Such an increase was enormously successful in itself, as we are now able to reach a greater share of our customers.

Lessons learned

Based on the organization’s experience, name up to three factors which you consider as indispensable to replicate this good practice. Name up to three risks that arose/could arise in implementing this good practice. Please explain these factors and/or risks briefly.

To hold a successful video hearing, the judge must have the same access to the applicant’s full Social Security file, including medical and educational records, as judges in the local office would. The procedure and development of the case must be equal to in-person hearings, and the judge must hear and consider the same testimony.

Our video service delivery initiative has run into two primary hurdles.

- The general public has been somewhat reluctant to embrace remote hearings. Many of our customers have retained a strong preference to hold face-to-face hearings. Oftentimes, there is a perception that an in person hearing will be fairer or more persuasive than a remote hearing. In other instances, customers are not convinced that video service delivery is secure and adequately safeguards their personal information. To overcome this obstacle, we will continue to educate the public and promote video service delivery as an equally viable option that is a perfect substitute for an in-person hearing. We will also continue to ensure that our software and hardware have all the necessary precautions to avoid any major data breaches or leaks that will compromise personally identifiable information or undermine the credibility of the system.

- Both the bandwidth and hardware to perform remote disability hearings are quite expensive, especially in light of the stringent requirements to ensure that data are secure and safe from malicious actors. While we are convinced that video service delivery represents a cost effective alternative to in-person hearings, it is undeniable that initial costs to start up this process can be significant. We will continue to work to reduce the cost of remote hearings and to convince our reviewing authorities that while initial costs of setting up video service delivery may be high, there are long-term costs savings to be realized.