SOAR Collaboration with SSA’s Office of Hearings Operations (OHO)

*Suggestions for working with your OHO*

The Social Security Administration’s (SSA) Office of Hearings Operations (OHO) directs a nationwide field organization staffed with Administrative Law Judges (ALJs) who conduct impartial hearings and make decisions on appealed determinations involving Old-Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance benefits (Title II, SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (Title XVI, SSI) payments. From Fiscal Years 2012 to 2017, national average processing times for a hearing increased 71% from 353 to 605 days. SOAR providers are able to demonstrate to OHO that they are representing “critical” applicants. This handout explains how you can promote SOAR with your OHO office to help ease their backlog and workload issues, while at the same time, improving access to expedited decisions for SOAR applicants.

# The Problem and SOAR Solution!

OHO offices maintain a master docket system that contains all requests for hearings and remanded claims. There are nearly 1 million claims awaiting a hearing date[[1]](#footnote-1). Getting the case ready for the hearing is time consuming for OHO staff. “Pulling” or “work-up” is the process of preparing a disability case file for a hearing. Hearing office staff reviews the electronic folder, identifies the relevant documents, and organizes those documents for the ALJ to consider in making a decision.

This high workload has created a large backlog. We know that many of these claims are what SSA classifies as “critical.” OHO defines a case as “critical” in the following situations:

* Terminal illness;
* Veterans with permanent and total disability rating from the Department of Veterans Affairs;
* Military casualty/wounded warrior case;
* Compassionate Allowances
* Dire need case; and
* Potentially violent[[2]](#footnote-2)

SOAR applicants, by definition, are “critical” cases because they meet, at minimum, the “dire need” (<https://www.ssa.gov/OP_Home/hallex/I-02/I-2-1-40.html>) designation. Therefore, SOAR providers can assist OHO offices with the special processing of these critical cases, and in return, improve OHO’s average processing times and easing workload burdens.

# Unique Role of SOAR Representatives

SOAR providers can be a great resource to OHO staff by:

* Submitting fully developed claims for “critical” applicants which will ease OHO’s burden of organizing and developing claims;
* Knowing about the applicant’s file and being prepared for the hearing or a review "On the Record" (<https://soarworks.samhsa.gov/article/prehearing-otr-reviews>);
* Ensuring cases are consistently ready at the time of hearing;
* Maintaining good communication with the applicant and OHO’s staff;
* Working with applicants to obtain the necessary evidence for their file;
* Assisting applicants with obtaining an attorney or other representative, so OHO does not need to postpone the hearing to give a chance for the applicant to get a representative

# Gaining Local OHO Involvement

Involving local OHO staff (e.g. Hearing Office Director, Group Supervisor or Chief ALJ) in your local steering committees and/or SOAR practitioner meetings can be a great way to share how SOAR collaborations can be a win-win! You can share information on specific “critical” cases, better understand OHO office workload and average processing times, and create a process for submitting SOAR “critical” claims.

* SOAR Directory: <https://soarworks.samhsa.gov/directory>
* Hearing Office Locator: <https://www.ssa.gov/appeals/ho_locator.html>
* SSA Office Locator: <https://www.ssa.gov/locator/>

Once you connect to the OHO office, you will want to send information about SOAR. Here are a few handouts to consider in addition to your local SOAR initiative information:

* [SOAR Overview Infographic](https://soarworks.samhsa.gov/sites/soarworks.prainc.com/files/SOAROverview-2020-508_0.pdf) (to provide an overview of the SOAR initiative)
* [2020 SOAR Outcomes Infographic](https://soarworks.samhsa.gov/sites/soarworks.prainc.com/files/SOAR2020Outcomes.pdf) (to share approval rates and processing times)
* [Getting Involved with SOAR](https://soarworks.samhsa.gov/sites/soarworks.prainc.com/files/Getting_Involved_with_SOAR-Adult-and_Child.docx) (to demonstrate the elements of the SOAR model and process)

# Benefit to OHO and SOAR Applicants

Access to SSI/SSDI can be a major tool in building resiliency and recovery, from both serious mental illness and homelessness. Without the support of a SOAR provider, it can take as long as 1-3 years to obtain approval for SSI/SSDI, during which time applicants experiencing homelessness often get lost in the process and require a great deal of community support simply to survive. SOAR collaboration with your OHO office can help ease their backlog and workload issues, while at the same time, improving access to expedited decisions for SOAR applicants.

# Additional Resources and Information

## Appointed Representative Services (ARS)

ARS is an online application that allows appointed representatives to view electronic folder (eFolder) documents in real time, to download eFolder contents including multimedia files, and upload medical evidence and other documents directly into a claimant's eFolder. Representatives may also download status reports with key information regarding their pending and recently closed cases. Using ARS will give you real time and up-to-date access to your claimant's electronic folders for cases pending at OHO. For more information, visit: <https://www.ssa.gov/ar/>

## OHO Structure

Each OHO Regional Office (RO), under the direction of the Regional Chief ALJ, is responsible for executing the hearings process within the region. It provides direction, leadership, management, and guidance to RO staff and the regional hearing offices. Each hearing office has a management team that includes the Hearing Office Chief ALJ (HOCALJ) and Hearing Office Director who supervise, plan, organize, and control hearing office operating activities. OHO hearing offices maintain a master docket system that contains all requests for hearings and remanded claims.

1. Disability backlogs: <https://oig.ssa.gov/top-ssa-management-issues/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Social Security Administration HALLEX on Critical Cases: <https://www.ssa.gov/OP_Home/hallex/I-02/I-2-1-40.html>

   \*Hearing processing time statistics from the text box: SSA Annual Performance Report 2017-2019 <https://www.ssa.gov/budget/FY19Files/2019APR.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)