SUMMARY

Disability Determination Services at the S.C. Vocational Rehabilitation Department

SEPTEMBER 2026

The S.C. House of Representatives Government Efficiency and Legislative Oversight Committee requested an audit of the State Disability Determination Services program administered by the S.C. Vocational Rehabilitation Department.

Audit Objectives

- Examine the leadership and operational management of the South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation Department's Disability Determination Services.
- Determine reasons for significant wait times associated with the disability determination process and identify strategies to decrease processing times and backlogs for Supplemental Security Income and Social Security Disability Insurance claims.

Our full report, including agency comments, is published on our website.

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Independence, Reliability, Integrity

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SC DDS Structure and Leadership

The Social Security Act provides that disability determinations for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) are made by the states. In South Carolina, disability determinations are made by South Carolina Disability Determination Services (SC DDS). SC DDS is housed under the S.C. Vocational Rehabilitation Department (SCVRD). The Social Security Administration (SSA) pays all costs for SC DDS; however, SC DDS employees are state employees. SC DDS is not uniquely structured when compared to other Southeastern states; however, we found that SC DDS' website is less informative.

Scope Impairments

We encountered delays and denials of access to necessary information during our audit. SC DDS operates under strict oversight by SSA, who reviewed almost all requests for information made to SC DDS.

We were prevented from interviewing employees for more than a month after our entry conference with SC DDS while SSA reviewed our initial request for information. SC DDS employees are state employees to whom we should have full access.

To identify best practices and strategies to decrease processing times and backlogs, we attempted to contact other states in South Carolina's SSA Region (Atlanta). We were ultimately instructed to submit individual FOIA requests for each of the seven states, which were sent to SSA on June 15, 2026. At the time of drafting our report (September 22, 2026), we had not received final responses for any of our FOIA requests.

Human Resources' Impact on Processing Time

The absence of hiring authority is a significant barrier to improving processing times. SC DDS' loss of employees since 2021 has likely contributed to extended claim processing times. We found:

- Because SSA must grant hiring authority, SC DDS has minimal control over hiring DDS employees.
- SSA does not grant hiring authority consistently or offer flexibility to replace staffing losses as needed.
- SC DDS' disability determination examiner salaries are not comparable with salaries for similar positions within SSA.
- From January 2021 to June 2026, SC DDS experienced a net reduction of 35% of its total disability determination examiners.
- SC DDS lost a total of 16 examiners with more than 15 years' experience, 12 of whom had over 20 years' experience.
- The lack of a telecommuting policy hinders SC DDS recruitment and retention.

Inaccessible Processing Time Data

Scope Impairment

SSA denied access to nearly all data we requested from SC DDS regarding disability determination claim processing times and backlogs. Without the requested data, reasons for significant wait times associated with the disability determination process could not be fully determined.

To try to mitigate the effects of the scope impairment, we searched for other sources of data. We reviewed SC DDS' disability determination examiner team statistics reports and publicly accessible SSA data. However, with only this information, evaluation of the stages in the SC DDS determination process to pinpoint specific causes of delays could not be completed. Additionally, because we were denied access to the source data for state disability claims, we were unable to verify the accuracy of SC DDS' disability examiner team statistics reports.

SC DDS provided internal rolling disability examiner team statistics reports for CY 2021 through CY 2025, along with year-to-date (YTD) figures through April for CY 2026. These reports included 12-month average processing times for SC DDS disability examiner teams; however, because we were denied access to claimant and additional data, we could not verify the accuracy of these calculations.

This reporting does not include the wait times associated with the initial transfer of the claim from SSA to SC DDS, nor the time that elapses after a favorable determination until benefits are disbursed to claimants. As a result, the data does not represent the wait time a claimant actually experiences.

SC DDS Disability Examiner Team 12-Month Average Processing Time (Days)

Regional Office	Calendar Year					5-Year Average
	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	
Columbia	78	81	76	61	70	73
Charleston	73	72	70	60	73	69
Greenville	75	76	71	65	69	71
SC DDS Overall	75	77	73	62	70	71

Source: LAC Analysis of SC DDS reports.

We were told by SCVRD leadership that they do not receive any reports with SC DDS' processing times. On July 17, 2026, we made a final request to SC DDS for any annual reports submitted to SCVRD that may include case processing information. SC DDS leadership provided links to publicly available SSA data. However, we were previously informed, by the same member of SC DDS leadership, that a direct comparison between SC DDS reporting and SSA data is not possible. In response to our preliminary draft, SC DDS noted that there is not a report regarding processing time submitted to SCVRD leadership on a regular basis. Performance data is only provided during monthly executive staff meetings, reported out by the DDS director.

Strategies to Reduce Processing Time

We reviewed efforts by SC DDS to reduce the state's backlog and decrease case processing time. We found:

- SC DDS offers temporary salary adjustments to incentivize staff to take on an increased caseload; however, disability examiner feedback indicates that most already handle significant caseloads, leading to questions about the effectiveness of the incentive.
- SC DDS outsources cases using associated user functionality within the processing system and this allows disability examiners from other states to adjudicate without transferring cases. Data accessibility remains an issue for evaluating the effectiveness of these efforts.
- According to feedback from SC DDS disability examiners we surveyed regarding their employment, the review of medical evidence is the most time-consuming aspect of the determination process.
- Feedback from disability examiners in our survey also identified factors, such as disability examiner caseload and applicant cooperation, that most significantly influence the length of time in case determinations.