

Achieving More Together

Ensuring Quality through a Team Approach

Social Security Administration
Office of Hearing Operations
Quality Review Team, Region IV



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"Quality is Everyone's Responsibility"

-W. Edwards Deming

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A Brief Introduction to the Social Security Administration's Office of Hearings Operations

The overall mission of the Office of Hearings Operations (OHO) is to administer the hearings and appeals programs for the SSA, providing timely and quality service to the public. The agency's goals are to:

Eliminate our hearings backlog and prevent its recurrence

- Provide claimants with due process hearings before administrative law judges and decide benefit claims based on the evidence of record;
- Review claimants' challenges to administrative law judge decisions and process court orders;
- Improve the quality of our decisions and our workload management practices throughout the hearings and appeals process; and
- Produce a fair share of work in an accurate, timely, and balanced manner.

Improve the timeliness and quality of our disability process

- Award benefits to those claimants who meet our disability standards as early in the process as possible;
- Improve case adjudication and case management technologies to aid in the efficient processing of policy-compliant decisions;
- Regularly update our disability policies and procedures;
- Learn and adhere to OHO's electronic business process (eBP); and
- Monitor and control workloads consistent with the eBP.

Preserve the public's trust in our programs

- Curb improper payments; and
- Issue accurate and policy-compliant decisions in a timely manner.

The Quality Review Program

The overall purpose of the Quality Review Program is to help the hearing offices throughout Region IV adhere to the Electronic Business Process (eBP) and to provide timely and legally sufficient hearings and decisions. The Quality Review Branch (QRB) identifies trends and deficiencies related to the eBP and to decision writing. Based on its review and analyses, it also develops an action plan to address training needs. Further, it reviews draft decisions to ensure that they are legally sufficient and adhere to quality. Legal sufficiency is a measure of how well a decision is supported by evidence and complies with the law. A quality decision is factually accurate, procedurally adequate, policy compliant, timely issued, and supported by substantial evidence. By ensuring that the staff is well trained in eBP and that the writers are able to produce legally sufficient, quality decisions, the QRB helps the agency to carry out its mission to provide timely and quality service to the public.

The team consists of attorney advisers and legal assistants who are policy leaders for the region with expertise in a wide array of subject matter. The attorneys perform in-line reviews of claim files after disability decisions have been written (EDIT status), while the legal assistants perform quality review audits of social security disability and non-disability cases at the Ready-to-schedule (RTS) stage. The team reviews hearing scheduling, evidence development, decisions, and dismissals; captures structured data as part of its reviews; analyzes the information to identify trends and the root cause of problems detected; and develops training to target the problems it detects.

A VIRTUAL UNIT

The Quality Review Branch works virtually from their home offices using a variety of tools to remain effective despite not being in the same physical location. The team schedules weekly conference calls to check in with one another. They also collaborate through email, SharePoint and Microsoft Office tools such as Word, PowerPoint, and Excel. The team also relies on Skype tools to share computer screens and assist one another with virtual presentations.



The Origins of the Training Initiative

Around 2016, SSA reviewed the processes and procedures used throughout OHO's Region IV (consisting of 37 hearing offices) and determined that there was a greater need for organizational consistency through training. Upper level hearing office management and staff provided requested feedback confirming an inconsistent foundation in the eBP just as SSA's internal data showed. Furthermore, hearing office chief administrative law judges throughout the region expressed concerns about legal sufficiency and quality in decision writing consistent with appeals council remand data. After a comprehensive review of the data, it became clear that many of the remand issues occurred during the case development process and during decision writing, primarily with regard to legal sufficiency issues. For example, there was evidence that cases were more likely to be postponed by unrepresented claimants between the ages of 18 to 25 than those of represented claimants. It was clear that offices were not using procedures and processes in place (such as pre-hearing development contacts) to reduce the likelihood of case postponement.

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Asset Utilization

The QRB was tasked with the training initiative to ensure consistency with the electronic business process and legal sufficiency in decision writing. Their directive included carrying out tasks consistent with the agency's mission: to reach a reasonable level of hearings pending and reduce wait time by providing compassionate and responsive services. This includes implementing improvements to the hearing business process, modernizing IT infrastructure, issuing policy changes, and rallying the workforce to improve. The QRB was instrumental in reaching these goals because it has the expertise to provide technological training to hearing offices, identify problems, create an action plan to address the issues, train the staff, and ensure improvements are still in place afterwards to foster a productive work environment.

The Initiative

The training initiative was designed to correct or improve all areas of the hearing office electronic business process (eBP). In this electronic world, the staff must have a strong foundation of eBP. A weak link at any part of the chain has a significant impact of the complete chain. For example, if a case technician fails to update a claimant's change of address, that failure ultimately could lead to dismissal of the claimant's case for failure to appear at a hearing because the claimant did not receive the notice at the new address. The administrative law judges rely on the support staff to input information accurately. They use the information to decide whether the individuals are disabled. Writers also rely on the information to be timely and accurate because they use the developed files to draft the decisions. Thus, QRB was in a unique position to ensure that policies were addressed properly and that protocol was followed, ensuring cohesiveness throughout the region and throughout the nation.

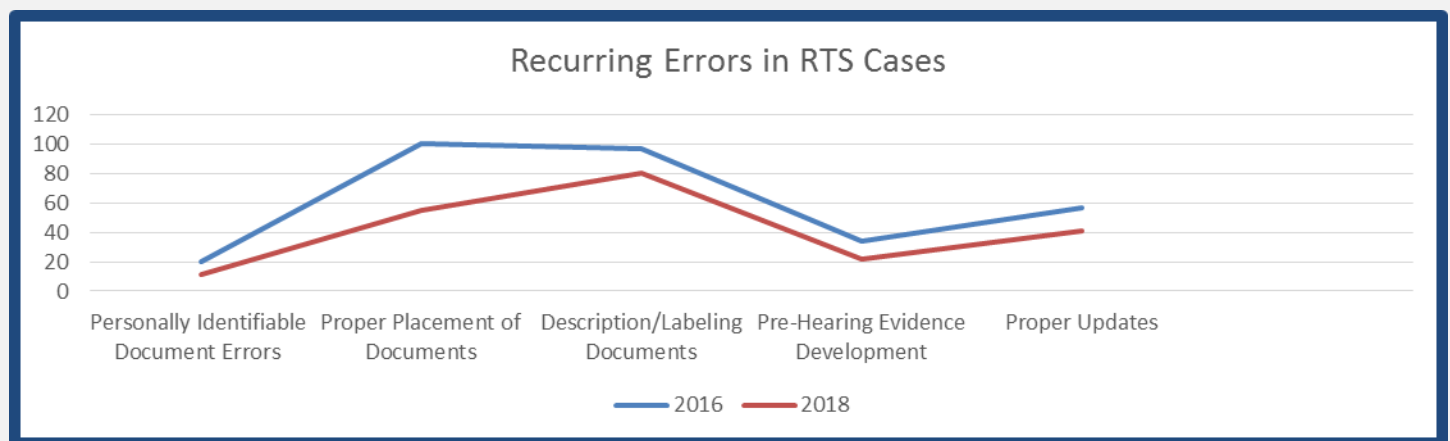
Accomplishing the Mission

In order to carry out its mission, the QRB assessed all aspects of cases to verify accurate interpretation and proper treatment and citations of applicable rules, regulations, and policies to assure legally sufficient decisions. In performing this task, the team identified developmental, legal and program training needs of employees. In addition to identifying training needs, the team shared its expertise by providing the training. During 2018 alone, the team provided full supplemental training in at least three offices, about five training sessions with decision writers and multiple sessions for case technicians and senior technicians.

During 2018, the QRB also conducted multiple in-line and focused reviews. In one instance, the QRB was tasked with performing a mini-review of one component. The team reviewed a sampling of cases that were worked up by case technicians, checking for accuracy and eBP compliance. Based on their review, the team recommended supplemental training for the component, including training in proper Certified Electronic Folder (CEF) document labeling, Case Processing and Management System (CPMS) actions/inputs, scheduling, case information summaries, queries, online retrieval system (ORS) documents, personally identifiable information (PII), and resource guides. In addition to providing the office with a summary of issues involving eBP compliance, it also provided an action plan. Following the mini-review, the QRB provided on-site training to the staff and worked with individuals on an individual basis to ensure that each member of the staff was able to use the electronic tools, both effectively and efficiently, to carry out their daily tasks. This was just one example, but the QRB performed this task at multiple offices.

Due to budget constraints, the QRB fine-tuned their teaching methods so that they could present the materials virtually. The team worked with each office individually on issues specific to that office, whether it involved issues with eBP and/or decision writing, and proceeded by preparing an action plan. The team recognized that the hearing offices might have different needs, so it divided its team based on the subject matter. The QRB attorneys primarily focused on training decision writers while the legal assistants focused on workup staff (case technicians and senior case technicians). They provided the offices with a list of areas that they taught and encouraged them to request any areas not mentioned. In doing so, the team updated its training materials based on the needs of the offices. Consequently, the team is able to help the office, as a whole, to run more efficiently.

As a result of the training, errors in certain areas improved by as much as 45% between 2016 and 2018.



The Evolution of the Team Approach

The QRB works virtually from their home offices throughout the region. In fact, some of the team members have been working together for over four years and never actually met one another. This lack of physical interaction can certainly interfere with relationship and team building, but the QRB found a way to work around the challenges and achieve a camaraderie uncommon in physical office settings.

Many of the QRB's team members attribute the unit's success to the principles established by its founding supervisor, Quality Review Officer Tracy Henry. She understood the challenges that the virtual environment could have on the team, so she employed a series of team building tasks and practices that ultimately ensured the success of the unit for years to come. For example, when she hired the initial quality review team in 2013, she encouraged collaboration on reviewing all aspects of case processing—from the moment a request for hearing is filed through scheduling, case development, and decision writing—for several months. This ensured that at the end of the training period, the entire team member was able to understand how other members would approach a situation and that all members would apply a consistent, uniform approach to quality reviews. Later, when new team members joined in 2015, Ms. Henry had each of the original team members work with their new teammates for a month at a time until everyone had a chance to work together, again promoting continued consistency in the application of policy and independent problem solving amongst the team.

“Tracy was one of the most inspiring leaders with whom I have ever had the pleasure of working. She treated us like professionals. She had an expectation for the highest level of quality and at the same time set an example that upheld that expectation. She never micro-managed your work; instead, she encouraged creativity and independence, which really allowed me to be confident in my decisions.”

—David Pollack, Esq., Quality Review Specialist.

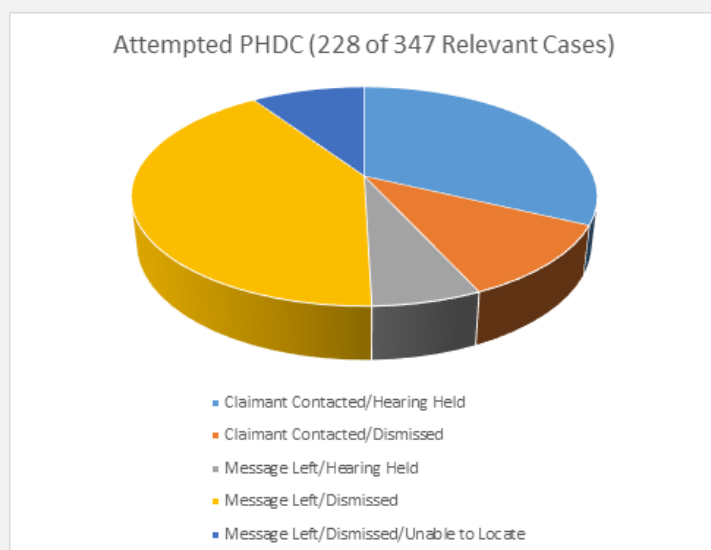
Ms. Henry provided the initial framework for the unit's training initiative, and when she was elevated to the bench in 2017, the branch continued to function as if she never left. While balancing competing assignments, they organized virtual unit meetings, prepared and vetted training materials, solicited hearing offices for special training needs, and planned and coordinated training events with hearing office management throughout the region. With the support of acting Quality Review Officer Gloria Brown, the team went on to produce a comprehensive catalogue of supplemental training.

It Starts with Hiring

Ms. Henry would always say that the QRB was a great unit because she brought in great people. She was very selective in the hiring process and looked for a certain type of employee that could work independently and had a diverse background that would add to the overall dynamics of the team. She also looked for the ability to work independently, which was essential in a virtual environment. As a result, she had a team of hardworking professionals with different strengths and experiences: former hearing office managers; decision writers; subject matter experts; national trainers; unit leads; and other program specialists, all possessing the innate ability to lead, complete assignments timely, and effect positive change.

An Impact beyond Training

The teamwork principles developed for the training initiative approach allowed the unit to substantially contribute to other projects, such as piloting the various innovative SSA tools with the potential to increase efficiency through technology. These tools included the streamlined fully favorable initiative and INSIGHT. The team-training model was also invaluable to other SSA initiatives employed to address a heavy volume of outstanding cases and pending unwritten decisions. For example, the QRB was able to assist SSA with its pre-hearing development contact (PHDC) initiative, which sought to prevent unnecessary postponements that delayed case processing. After QRB data showed that unrepresented claimants made up one-third of all postponed hearings, the team found that much of the problem could be avoided early in case processing by conducting these pre-hearing development contacts. The QRB was utilized to train to region IV on the initiative, which proved successful. On claims where hearing office staff conducted PHDCs, there was only an 11 percent postponement rate, versus about a 33 percent postponement rate when PHDC was not utilized.



The QRB's training continues, as well. It trains whenever there is a need. In terms of initiative, it is at the forefront in participating in piloting new projects and in sharing knowledge and skills. In addition to the PHDC initiative, the team was recently involved in the streamlined fully favorable initiative that was created to shorten the time to draft fully favorable decisions. The QRB also piloted INSIGHT, a web-based application to assist decision writers and administrative law judges in spotting quality issues in draft decisions. When OHO initiated the "all hands on deck" initiative, the QRB assisted with reducing the number of decisions pending. During this time, the team continued to accept special assignments from the Regional Office, particularly training assignments. The QRB's impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of the hearing is profound because the team's work contributed to the hearing offices' ongoing objective to meet OHO's mission of providing quality support and timely service to the public.

Conclusion

The success of the QRB teamwork/team-training model is apparent by the increased productivity and quality enjoyed throughout OHO's Region IV. Hearing offices demonstrate measurably improved performance on strategic objectives by meeting or exceeding target performance goals thanks to the comprehensive training that the team is able to provide. Most importantly, hearing offices enjoy the training and commonly offer positive feedback.

Beginning in fiscal year 2019, the Quality Review Branch has resumed in-line quality reviews of decision writing. Under the new leadership of Quality Review Officer Anita Bellinger, the team continues to make strides towards pioneering new training initiatives based on the specifically targeted data produced from the reviews and to work on other special projects that contribute to the agency's mission, all while employing a team approach. The unit holds weekly team meetings where they review cases as a group to ensure consistency. They are planning new innovative approaches to team training for every office in Region IV to help provide the best service possible to the agency's most important customers, the American public.

"I just wanted to thank you for training our office today. You did an outstanding job. The staff, as well as management, asked many questions and were fully engaged. Our office will certainly benefit from this training presentation."

-Tampa, FL Hearing Office

"Thank you so much for your series of training. I think all three training sessions provided valuable information to the legal assistants in our office!"

-Montgomery, AL Hearing Office

"Thanks again, especially the CDR refresher. Excellent and clear presentation of the information."

-Ft. Myers, FL Hearing Office

