

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 SSI/SSDI determinations. According to SSA's website, the average wait time for a hearing is about one yearⁱ. However, this varies depending on the hearing office and the number of pending cases. SOAR providers can 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. While the average wait time for a hearing has decreased in the last few years, many applicants are still waiting up to one year or more for their hearings. The process of preparing a disability case file for a hearing, known as "work-up," is time-consuming for OHO staff. It involves reviewing the electronic folder, identifying the relevant documents, and organizing those documents for the ALJ to consider in making a decision.

This high workload has created a large backlog. Many of these claims are classified as "critical" by SSA:

- Terminal illness
- Veterans with a permanent and total disability rating from the Department of Veterans Affairs
- Military casualty/wounded warrior case
- Compassionate Allowances
- Dire need case
- Potentially violentⁱⁱ

SOAR applicants, by definition, are "critical" cases because they meet, at minimum, the "dire need"ⁱⁱⁱ designation. Therefore, SOAR providers can assist OHO offices with the special processing of these critical cases, improving OHO's average processing times and easing workload burdens.

Unique Role of SOAR Representatives

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

- Submitting fully developed claims for "critical" applicants, which will ease OHO's burden
- Knowing about the applicant's file and being prepared for the hearing or a review "[On the Record](#)"

- Ensuring cases are consistently ready at the time of the hearing
- Maintaining good communication with the applicant and OHO 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 the applicant a chance to get a representative
- Submitting a letter to OHO requesting an expedited hearing with proof of dire need (e.g., eviction notice, foreclosure, homelessness, and/or unable to meet basic needs). See the sample letter below.

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](#)
- [Hearing Office Locator](#)
- [SSA Office 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](#) (provides an overview of the SOAR initiative)
- [SOAR Outcomes Infographic](#) (shares approval rates and processing times)
- [Getting Involved with SOAR](#) (demonstrates the elements of the SOAR model and process)

Additional Resources and Information

Appointed Representative Services (ARS)

ARS is an online application that allows appointed representatives to access a claimant's electronic folder (eFolder) for cases pending at OHO. Representatives can view documents in real-time, download content, including multimedia files, and upload medical evidence and other documents. Representatives may also download status reports with key information regarding their pending and recently closed cases. 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.

Sample Letter Requesting Expedited Hearing Due to Dire Need

SSA Office of Hearing Operations (OHO)

Re:

SSN:

DOB:

To Whom It May Concern:

Please consider conducting an expedited hearing for the above-referenced claimant, as this individual has been experiencing homelessness for [X] months and has been unable to obtain or keep stable housing because of a lack of resources. This history of homelessness means this individual is in dire need of an expedited hearing. There are no other resources to pay for housing. Without an expedited hearing, this individual will be unable to afford to meet basic needs.

Thank you for your consideration. Please contact me at [phone/email] if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

ⁱ <https://www.ssa.gov/appeals/publicusefiles.html>

ⁱⁱ https://www.ssa.gov/OP_Home/hallex/I-02/I-2-1-40.html

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