

Soc. Security Revamps Disability Benefits

By MARY DALRYMPLE

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WASHINGTON -- People seeking disability benefits from Social Security can expect to spend less time waiting for a decision under changes rolled out Tuesday on the anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Social Security Commissioner Jo Anne Barnhart said people who are clearly disabled could be approved for benefits in as little as 20 days under the new procedures, which the agency expects to start putting into action next spring.

The rest of the roughly 2 million people who seek disability benefits each year can expect to spend less time working through the process for appealing decisions when benefits are denied.

"Everybody recognizes that there's a need for change and we need to improve the process," Barnhart said in an interview.

The Social Security disability insurance program pays cash assistance to people who cannot work for a year or more because of a disability. To qualify, an individual must have worked long enough, paid Social Security taxes and met the criteria for disability assistance. More than 11 million people, including some family members of disabled workers, receive benefits.

Among the changes, the new procedures will screen applicants for cases of clear disability that can be quickly approved for benefits by a special unit.

For other applicants, the changes replace a step that sent cases back to a state agency for review if the state agency had denied a claim. Barnhart said that state review rarely overturned a decision and is considered a "rubber stamp" by many.

Under new procedures, the claim would be sent to federal reviewing officials, a standardized unit within the federal Social Security system.

Barnhart said the federal review means many applicants could get a more meaningful reconsideration of their claims more quickly.

The new process also establishes a unit of medical and vocational experts available to those evaluating disability applications at all stages of the process.

When designing the new system, the Social Security Administration determined that it could take an individual 1,153 days to move through the entire application and appeal process if the claim had been denied at each step.

Combining the new procedures with an electronic system that alleviates the need for Social Security officials to mail paper files around the country, Barnhart said that process should shrink about 25 percent.

The Social Security Administration plans to publish proposed regulations for public comment on Wednesday and issue final

regulations by the end of the year. The administration expects it will take a couple years to implement the new system throughout the country.

On the Net:

Social Security Administration: <http://www.ssa.gov>