

Improve Hearings Pending

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APG Goal Statement and Targets

Improve customer service in the hearings process by prioritizing those individuals who have waited the longest for a hearing decision.

Annual Targets:

- FY 2018 – Complete 97 percent of cases that begin the fiscal year 430 days old or older (complete ~374,000 cases).
- FY 2019 – Complete 95 percent of cases that begin the fiscal year 350 days old or older (complete ~385,000 cases¹).

¹ The number of cases is an estimate and will be updated at the end of FY 2018

Quarterly Targets:

	FY 2018	FY 2019
Q1	25 percent of aged cases decided	25 percent of aged cases decided
Q2	50 percent of aged cases decided	50 percent of aged cases decided
Q3	75 percent of aged cases decided	75 percent of aged cases decided
Q4	97 percent of aged cases decided	95 percent of aged cases decided

APG Overview

Members of the public may be eligible for Social Security or Supplemental Security Income Benefits. After we decide eligibility for benefits, or that we will stop benefits, or change the amount, we send a letter explaining our decision. The public has the right to appeal decisions, which can be addressed at one of four levels, including an Administrative Law Judge Hearing.

Over 1 million people are waiting an average of 605 days for a hearing decision on their cases. In FY 2017, due in part to reduced disability receipts and increased adjudicative capacity, we began reducing the number of hearings pending. While we began reducing the hearings pending, wait times remain unacceptable.

To reduce the hearings pending and lengthy wait times, we implemented numerous initiatives as part of our [Compassionate And REsponsive Service \(CARES\) Plan](#).

Alignment with Agency Strategic Plan

The Hearings Pending APG supports the following strategic goal, objective, and strategy defined in our draft FYs 2018 – 2022 Agency Strategic Plan.

- Strategic Goal 1: Deliver Services Effectively
- Strategic Objective 1.1: Improve Service Delivery
- Strategy:
 - Advance and update the CARES Plan to address the number of pending hearing decisions and lengthy wait times

Challenges

The following are continued challenges to reducing the hearings pending:

- Hearings Operations Staff Levels
 - Decreased staffing levels make it difficult to attain our goal and provide the service our claimants expect and deserve.
- Hearings Operations Productivity
 - We continue to focus on the timeliness of our decisions without sacrificing quality. Ensuring high quality at the hearings level also reduces time-intensive Appeals Council remands and subsequent hearings.
- Declination of Video Hearings
 - Declinations cause an inability to hold hearings by video at those hearing offices with more capacity.

Opportunities

Leveraging Lessons Learned

We identified lessons learned from the FY 2016 – FY 2017 Hearings Pending APG that we can put into action to ensure success. These actions include:

- Moving workloads around the country to better align with our resources;
- Transferring and scheduling cases according to established milestones to meet the 75-day hearing notice requirement and ensure completion by the end of the fiscal year; and
- Creating a top-100 oldest cases of concern report to ensure that complex cases, which are difficult to schedule and hear, receive sustained attention until they are completed.

Opportunities (cont.)

Accomplishing our goal will:

- Provide decisions to those claimants who have waited the longest;
- Reduce the average age of all cases pending at the hearings level; and
- Ultimately reduce the wait times for decisions.

Assumptions

The following are our assumptions for accomplishing this APG:

- Normal levels of ALJ and support staff attrition.
- Normal operations of our facilities throughout the year.
- Steady pipeline of disability claim receipts without any dramatic increase.
- Funding for overtime and replacement hiring.

Risks and Mitigation

Key Risks	Mitigation
High levels of attrition	With sufficient budgetary resources, we can replace ALJs and support staff accordingly.
Catastrophic events that force closure of our facilities	We can move work to other hearing offices to avoid ceasing services in an affected area; however, postponements of some hearings would be unavoidable.
Significant increase in disability claim receipts due to factors outside our control	We would maximize effective use of overtime and move work to other hearing offices to balance workloads.

Implementation Strategies

Strategies	
Increase Adjudicatory Capacity	We plan to hire (TBD) ² ALJs in FY 2018 and (TBD) ALJs in FY 2019. Additional ALJs will help offset production losses from ALJ attrition and allow us to continue to hear and decide cases timely.
Process and Decisional Quality Improvements	We continue to emphasize quality work and provide training on areas where errors are most common. Our focus on quality ensures that claimants are receiving high-quality decisions while reducing the incidence of remands from the Appeals Council.

² Awaiting FY 2019 budget approval

Implementation Strategies (cont.)

Strategies	
Leverage Technology Improvements	<p>We are moving forward with Insight, which will expand to additional hearing offices this year. Insight uses natural language processing (NLP) to scan draft decisions for language that could result in errors, saving time by avoiding remands.</p> <p>Our duplicate identifying software is also in the procurement stage. This software will reduce the time it takes to review, decide, and draft cases by using artificial intelligence and NLP to identify duplicative medical evidence.</p> <p>We will continue to use video hearings to shift workloads around the country. Video hearings allow us to align offices with longer wait times with offices that have more adjudicative resources, reducing fluctuations in wait times from office to office. In FY 2017, we held 28 percent of hearings by video.</p>

Implementation Strategies (cont.)

Strategies	
Increase Accountability and Focus on Aged Cases	<p>We continue to hold monthly, and in some cases bi-weekly meetings, with our regions to discuss aged case processing and strategies. We have also outlined clear case processing deadlines, as indicated in our quarterly milestones, and have used lessons learned from the previous year to inform our strategy. This process ensures that cases are being worked in First-In-First-Out order and that our oldest cases are prioritized for hearings, decisions, and closure.</p>

FY 2018 Quarterly Milestones

Q1

- Transfer 100 percent of aged cases that will be heard by ALJs in other hearing offices. Transfer of cases early in the fiscal year; i.e., by the end of Q1, ensures assisting offices have sufficient time to process their aged cases.

Q2

- Schedule 100 percent of aged cases for a hearing. Scheduling cases by the end of Q2 ensures sufficient time in the fiscal year to hold hearings and complete those cases by the end of the fiscal year.

Q3

- Hold hearings for 100 percent of aged cases. Holding hearings on the aged cases by the end of Q3 ensures there is sufficient time to hold any necessary subsequent hearings and complete post hearing development prior to the end of the fiscal year.

Q4

- Close 97 percent of aged cases. When a case is closed, we mail the claimant a decision on their appeal, and the case is no longer part of our pending workload.

FY 2019 Quarterly Milestones

Q1

- Transfer 100 percent of aged cases, that will be heard by ALJs, to other hearings offices.

Q2

- Schedule 100 percent of aged cases for a hearing.

Q3

- Hold hearings for 100 percent of aged cases.

Q4

- Close 95 percent of aged cases.

Key Indicators

Secondary indicator: (Annual Target Only)

- Total Hearings Pending
 - FY 2018 Target – Reduce the total hearings pending to 900,000
 - FY 2019 Target – Reduce the total hearings pending to 717,000.

Data Accuracy and Reliability

Our hearings workload data comes from our Case Processing Management System (CMPS) and is accurate and reliable. CPMS has been reviewed and validated by auditors who have endorsed its quality and reliability.

Our Target Age Summary report allows us to isolate cases that are 430 days old or older, to track their progress through the identified APG milestones. This report shows each region and office's progress toward the goal.

The Disability Adjudication Reporting Tool (DART) provides similar data to the Target Age Summary report, but with more detail, including a listing of all current aged cases that can be sorted by filing date, region, office, status, etc. DART will help us identify specific problem cases so we can give them individualized attention to ensure they are processed timely.

Stakeholders

Congress: Our Office of Hearings Operations meets with congressional Committees quarterly to discuss our CARES Plan and associated initiatives, and their feedback into this Plan is used to evaluate and improve our programs. Many of the initiatives detailed in the CARES Plan have a direct impact on our ability to hear and decide cases timely.

Claimant Representatives: We interact with claimant representatives through the National Association of Disability Representatives and National Organization of Social Security Claimants' Representatives in order to resolve questions they have about our program or current business processes.

Stakeholders (cont.)

Claimant Advocacy and Disability Advocacy Organizations: These organizations advocate for the rights of the disabled and those applying for disability.

Labor Union Organizations: These organizations represent our employees and ALJs. They provide input to our Hearings Operations leadership.

FY 2018 Q1 Progress Update

FY 2018 Q1 Progress Update

Primary Indicator

FY 2018 Target: Decide 97% of cases that begin the fiscal year at 430 days or older (complete ~374,000)

FY 2018 Q1³ Results: Completed 32.7% of cases that began the fiscal year 430 days or older.

Quarterly Target Met

	FY 2018 Target	FY 2018 Results
Q1	25% of aged cases decided	32.7% of aged cases decided (126,067)
Q2	50% of aged cases decided	
Q3	75% of aged cases decided	
Q4	97% of aged cases decided	

³ FY 2018 Q1 results are through December 29, 2017, which is the end of the operating month.

FY 2018 Q1 Progress Update (cont.)

Secondary Indicator Q1 Results (Annual Target Only)

Total Hearings Pending

FY 2018 Target: 900,000

FY 2018 Q1 Results: 1,032,814

Overall APG Progress

At the close of the first quarter, we completed 32.7% of aged cases, with 259,569 aged cases remaining to reach the FY 2018 goal. Additionally, we scheduled 89% and held hearings on 57.9% of aged cases. Our total hearings pending continues to decline from a FY 2018 opening of 1,056,026 to 1,032,814 total pending, a reduction of 23,212 cases. This was the 12th straight month that our pending has decreased, with the last increase occurring in December 2016. Newly hired decision writers and administrative law judges (who entered on duty late FY 2017 and early FY 2018) continue to gain experience and increase productivity.

FY 2018 Q1 Progress Update (cont.)

Milestone Update:

FY 2018 Q1 Milestone Summary	
Milestone	Transfer 100 percent of aged cases that will be heard by ALJs in other offices. Transfer of cases early in the year (i.e., by the end of Q1) ensures assisting offices have sufficient time to work their aged cases.
Status (e.g., Complete, On-Track, Missed)	Complete
Results/Comments (Provide discussion of Progress, changes from last update, Anticipated Barriers or other Issues Related to Milestone Completion)	This milestone is complete and the window for transferring aged case has closed. Hearing offices may now only transfer aged cases under special circumstances. These cases will be evaluated on an individual basis before being approved for transfer.

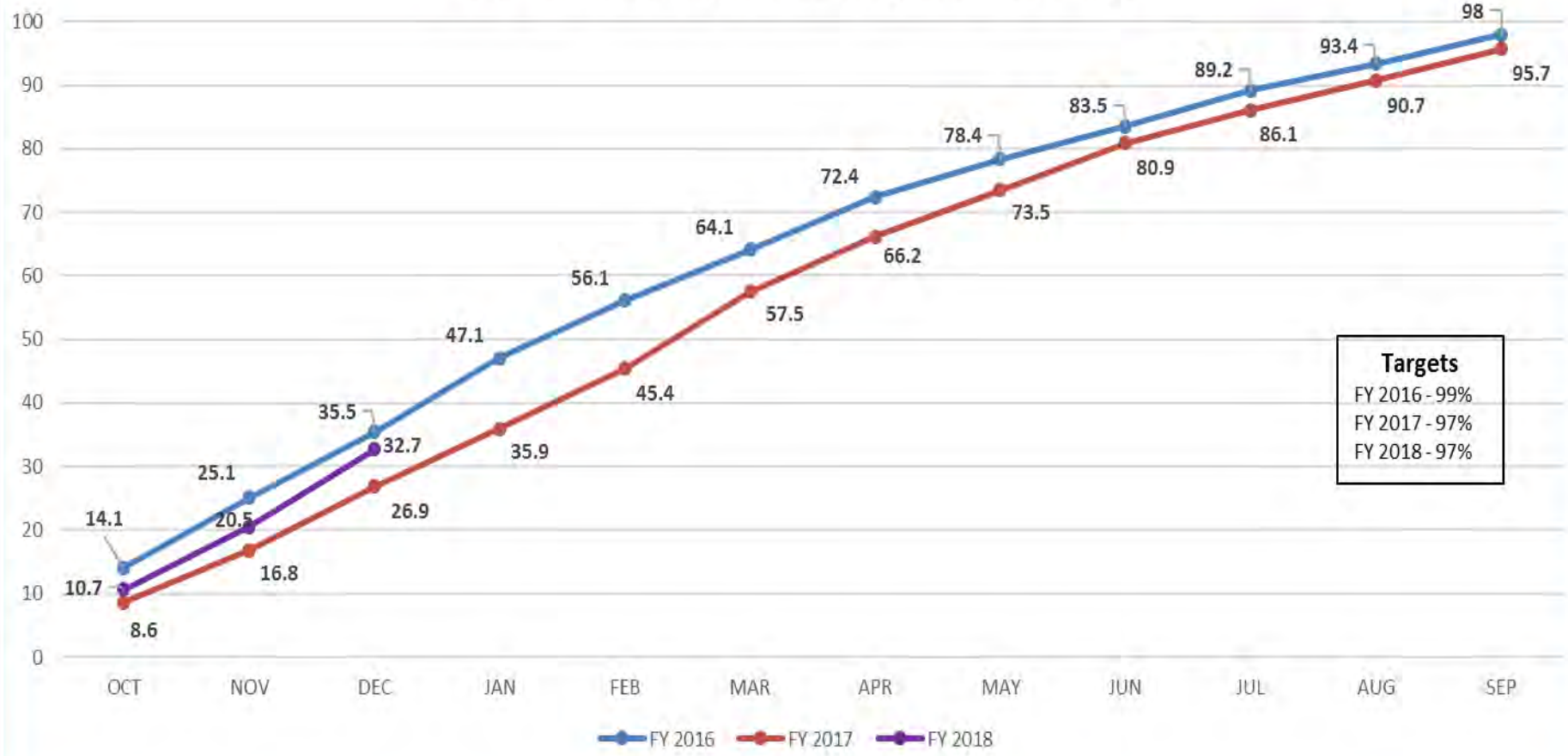
FY 2018 Q1 Progress Update (cont.)

Next Steps:

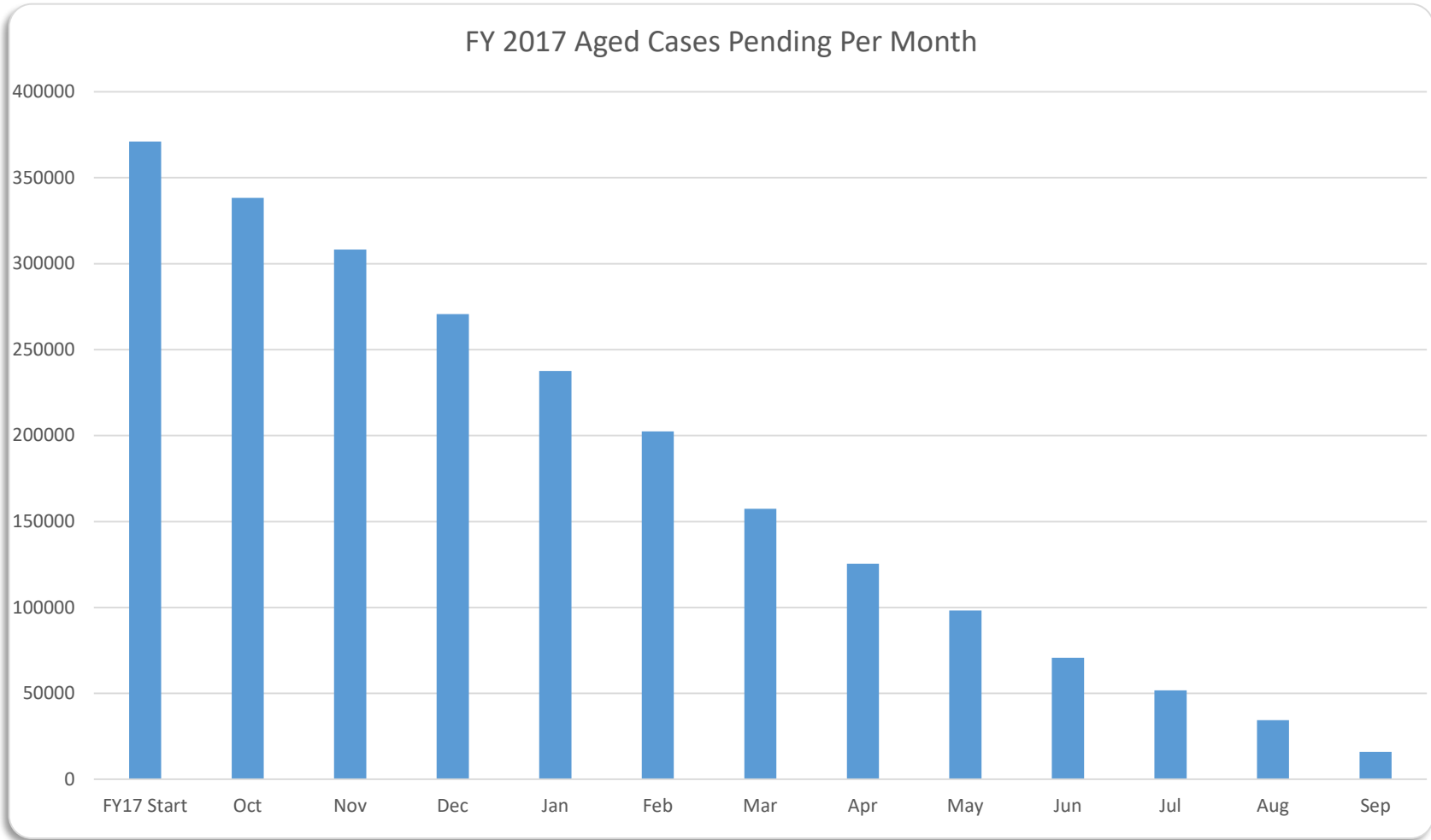
FY 2018 Q2 Milestone Summary	
Milestone	Schedule 100 percent of aged cases for a hearing. Scheduling cases by the end of Q2 ensures sufficient time in the fiscal year to hold hearings and complete those cases by the end of the fiscal year.
Status (e.g., Complete, On-Track, Missed)	On-Track
Results/Comments (Provide discussion of Progress, changes from last update, Anticipated Barriers or other Issues Related to Milestone Completion)	At the close of the first quarter, hearings were held on 57.9% of cases and hearings have been scheduled for 89% of cases, with 11% (41,568 cases) awaiting scheduling.

Historical Data

Fiscal Year to Date Aged Case Completion Percentage



Historical Data

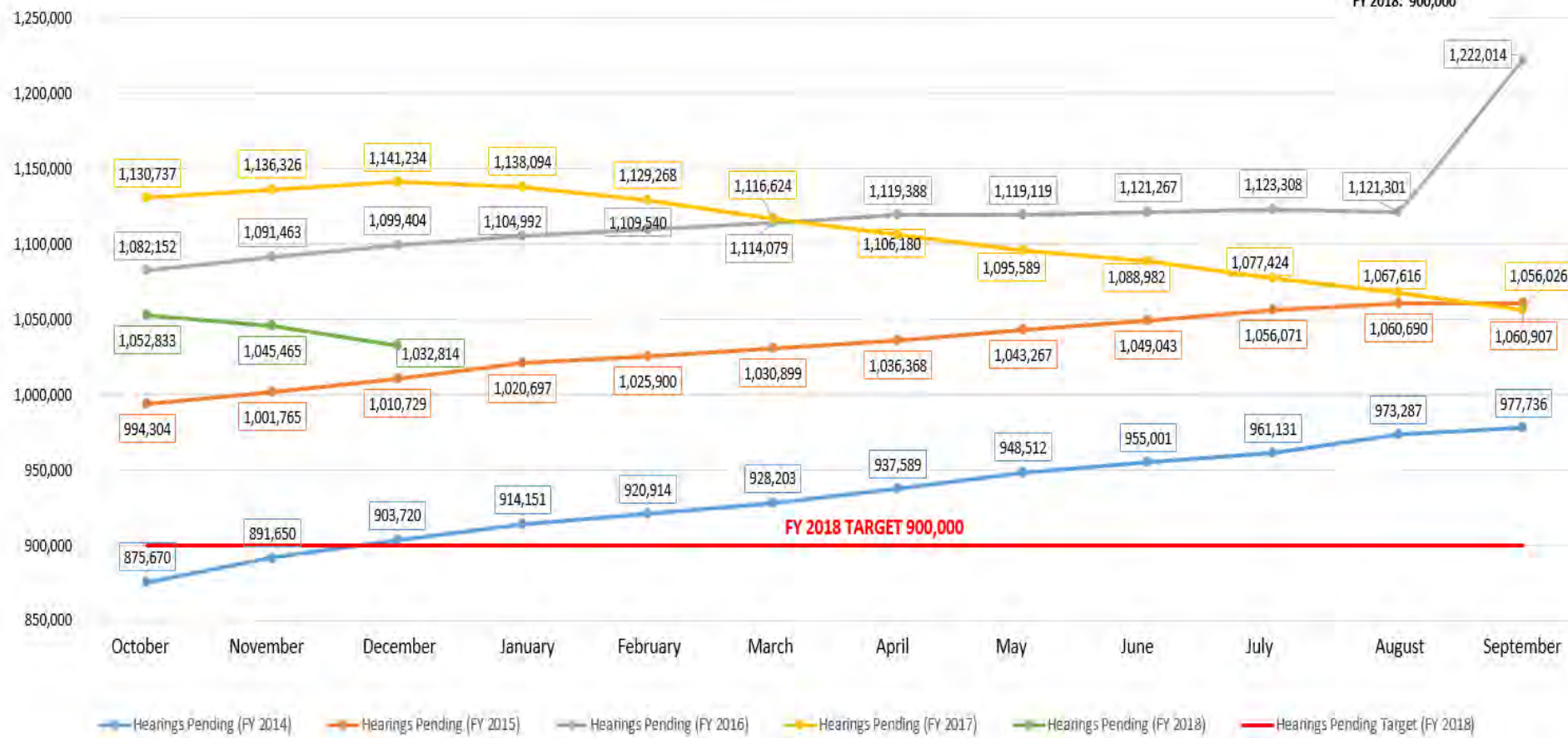


In FY 2017, we made steady progress toward our APG to reduce hearings pending over 430 days. While we did not meet the 97 percent goal, we were able to complete 96 percent of these cases. We used our lessons learned from FY 2017 to develop a comprehensive strategy to achieve our FY 2018 goal.

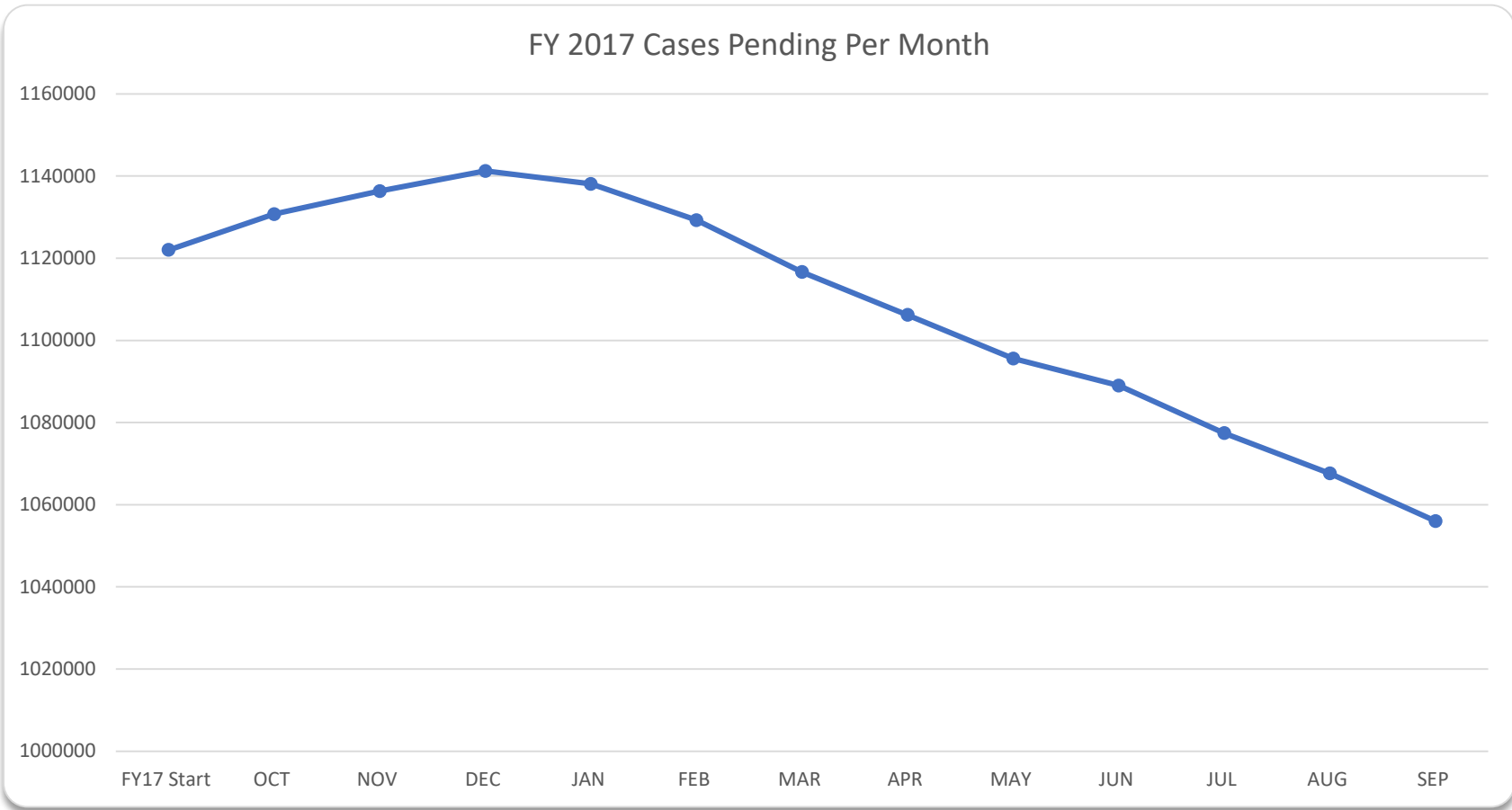
Historical Data

Secondary Indicator - Total Hearings Pending

FY Targets
 FY 2014: 932,000
 FY 2015: 1,056,000
 FY 2016: 1,087,000
 FY 2017: 1,071,000
 FY 2018: 900,000



Historical Data



While cases pending increased in the first quarter of FY 2017, we were able to decrease the overall pending for 9 consecutive months in FY 2017. As a result of this progress, we started FY 2018 with lower overall pending. If we are able to sustain this reduction in overall pending, we will reduce our universe of aged cases and ultimately reduce our average processing time going forward.