



## FYs 2020–2021 Agency Priority Goal Action Plan

# Improve Hearings Pending

### **Goal Leaders:**

Goal Leader: Elaine Garrison-Daniels, Assistant Deputy Commissioner, Office of Hearings Operations

Deputy Goal Leader: Patrick Nagle, Chief Administrative Law Judge, Office of Hearings Operations

# Overview

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## Goal Statement and Targets

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

- By September 30, 2020, decide 98 percent of cases that begin the fiscal year 270 days old or older.<sup>1</sup>
- By September 30, 2021, decide 98 percent of cases that begin the fiscal year 190 days old or older.

Quarterly Targets:

	FY 2020	FY 2021
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	98 percent of aged cases decided	98 percent of aged cases decided

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<sup>1</sup> Setting the number of days for this target is how we define aged cases.

# Overview

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## **Challenge**

Eliminating the hearings backlog and reducing the time it takes to issue a hearing decision remains one of our most critical priorities. We have made great progress with the hearings backlog, reducing the number of people waiting for a hearing decision each consecutive month since January 2017. At the close of FY 2019, we had 575,000 people waiting an average of 506 days for their hearing decision, which is the lowest level since FY 2004. While this reduction is a vast improvement, wait times remain unacceptable.

## **Opportunities**

We continue to focus on processing our oldest cases first and employing numerous initiatives as part of our [Compassionate And REsponsive Service \(CARES\) Plan](#).

# Leadership and Implementation Team

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## Office of Hearings Operations

### APG Leadership and Implementation Teams

#### Leadership Team

**Elaine Garrison-Daniels**, *Assistant Deputy Commissioner*  
Goal Leader

**Patrick Nagle**, *Chief Administrative Law Judge*  
Deputy Goal Leader

*Associate Commissioner*  
Office of Budget, Facilities & Security (OBFS)

*Division Director*  
OBFS Division of Workload Management

*Special Projects Officer*  
OBFS Division of Workload Management

*Management Analyst*  
OBFS Division of Workload Management

#### Implementation Team

# Goal Structure and Strategies

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

- Strategic Goal 1: Deliver Services Effectively
- Strategic Objective 1.1: Improve Service Delivery

By focusing on completing our oldest cases first, we will:

- Provide decisions to claimants who have waited the longest;
- Reduce the average age of all cases pending at the hearing level;
- Adhere to our first-in-first-out case processing policy; and
- Reduce the overall wait times for decisions.

Key indicators of success in our goal progress include:

- Reduction in hearings pending: The reduction in cases pending for a hearing before an administrative law judge (ALJ).
- Reduction in Average Processing Time (APT): The reduction in the average time a claimant waits from the date of the hearing request to the date the hearing decision is issued.

# Goal Structure and Strategies

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## **Implementation Strategies:**

- **Prioritizing Aged Cases:** To reduce the number of hearings pending and lengthy wait times, we continue to focus on processing our oldest cases first.
- **Optimizing Customer Service Delivery:** Through the expansion of our video hearings network, we continue to improve our service delivery by maximizing our ability to balance workloads nationally. As a result, we will continue our efforts to improve timely service to claimants in offices with the longest wait times.

# Goal Structure and Strategies

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## Employing Initiatives of the CARES Plan:

- **Business Process Efficiencies:** We will modernize our policies and procedures to streamline our processes, eliminate duplicative efforts, and ultimately reduce the number of claims pending at the hearing level. For example, our Centralized Scheduling Units initiative centralizes administrative work in a regional hub and streamlines the disability determination and adjudication process.
- **Information Technology (IT) Innovations:** We will continue to invest in key technology innovations in order to provide faster, streamlined, and more efficient IT tools for our employees, external stakeholders, and the public. For example, our Duplicate Identifying Process initiative uses new technology to identify possible duplicate medical evidence in the electronic claims file, allowing us to process and decide claims more timely.
- **Accountability and Oversight:** We are focusing on oversight of our processes and accountability across the organization to encourage a high quality, productive workforce and to ensure we meet the needs of the claimants we serve. For example, the development of productivity metrics across the Office of Hearings Operations will allow us to assess the performance of all employees in particular positions.

# Summary of Progress – FY 2020 Q4

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## **Overall APG Progress**

In FY 2020, we decided 222,986, or nearly 92 percent of our total aged cases, with 19,807 cases remaining.<sup>2,3</sup> We reduced our hearings pending to 418,313—a reduction of 157,108 cases from the FY 2019 end of year pending of 575,421. Our annual average processing time improved from 506 days in FY 2019 to 386 days in FY 2020.

We achieved this progress despite service changes in our hearing offices due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the fourth quarter, we continued to offer primarily telephone hearings, and the high number of postponements impacted our ability to meet FY 2020 case scheduling and hearings held milestones. The percentage of aged cases scheduled was 96 percent at the end of the fiscal year, while 9,662 cases remained unscheduled. Consequently, we were only able to hold hearings on 95 percent of aged cases, putting the 98 percent completion goal out of reach.

Our Division of Workload Management, in coordination with Office of Hearings Operations Regional Offices, continues to work closely with hearing offices to prioritize the scheduling, hearing, and completion of FY 2020 aged cases. Recently, we introduced online video hearings in some offices as an addition to telephone hearings. In order to meet the needs of our claimants and their representatives, we plan to expand the availability of online video hearings to all hearing offices. We are optimistic that this additional mode of conducting hearings will aid in our progress toward the FY 2021 goal.

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<sup>2</sup> FY 2020 results are through September 25, 2020, which is the end of the operating month.

<sup>3</sup> Effective March 17, we took steps to protect the public and our employees from COVID-19. At this time, we are still assessing how the COVID-19 pandemic will impact our workload performance ([and hiring] where appropriate).

# Key Milestones

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We have identified quarterly milestones to assess our progress toward completing the hearings pending goal.

Milestone Summary		
Key Milestone	Milestone Due Date	Milestone Status
<b>FY 2020</b>		
Transfer 100 percent of aged cases that will be heard by ALJs in assisting offices	Q1	Complete
Schedule 98 percent of aged cases	Q2	Not Met
Hold hearings on 98 percent of aged cases	Q3	Not Met
Decide 98 percent of aged cases	Q4	Not Met
<b>FY 2021</b>		
Transfer 100 percent of aged cases that will be heard by ALJs in assisting offices	Q1	On-Track
Schedule 98 percent of aged cases	Q2	
Hold hearings on 98 percent of aged cases	Q3	
Decide 98 percent of aged cases	Q4	

# Key Indicators

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## **Primary Indicator:** Aged Cases

- FY 2020 Target: Decide 98 percent of cases that begin the fiscal year 270 days old or older (decide ~237,000 cases).
- FY 2020 Results: 92 percent of aged cases decided

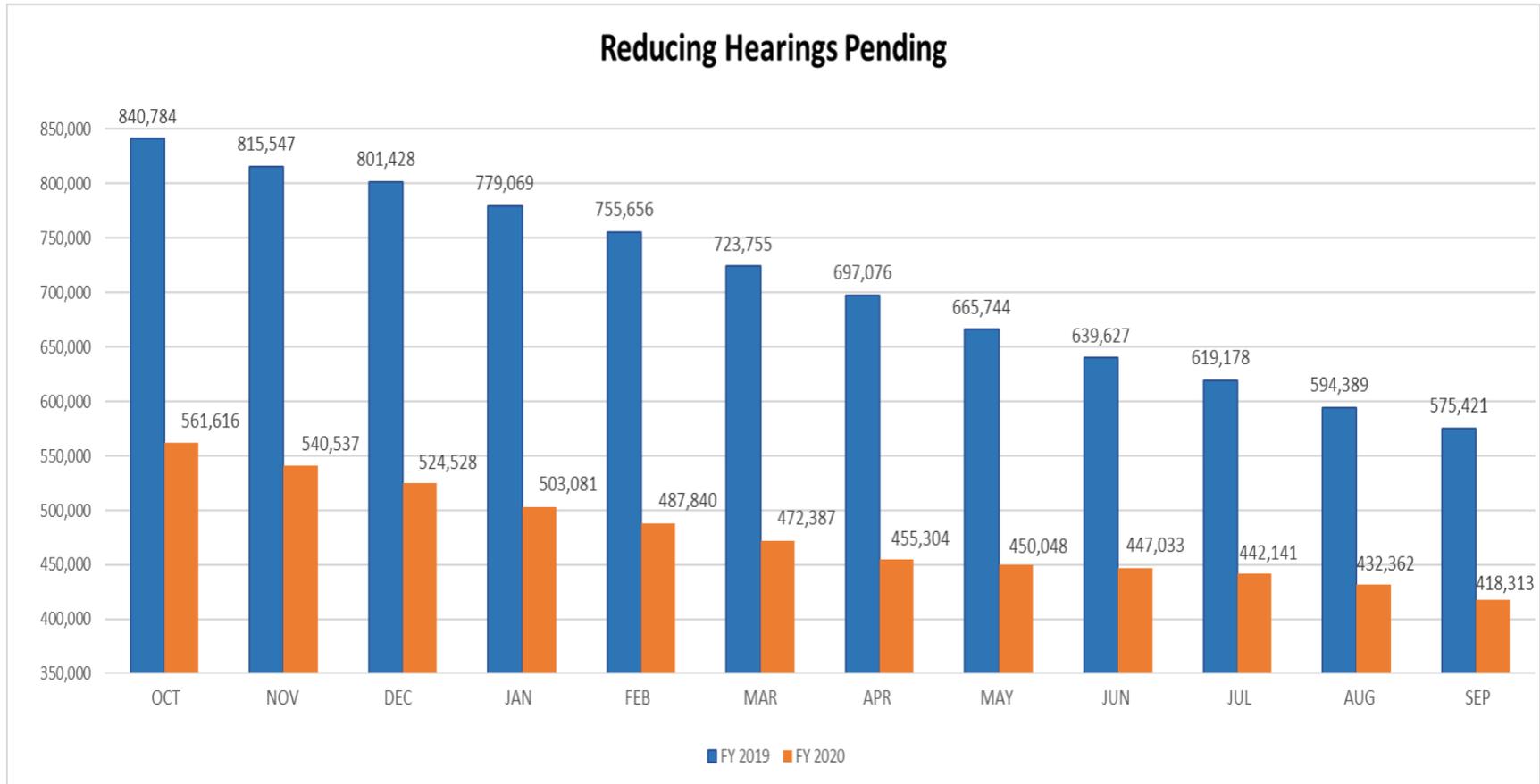
## Quarterly Targets

	FY 2020 Target	FY 2020 Results
Q1	25 percent of aged cases decided	47 percent of aged cases decided
Q2	50 percent of aged cases decided	77 percent of aged cases decided
Q3	75 percent of aged cases decided	87 percent of aged cases decided
Q4	98 percent of aged cases decided	92 percent of aged cases decided

# Key Indicators

## Secondary Indicator: Hearings Pending

- FY 2020 Target: 352,000
- FY 2020 Results: 418,313

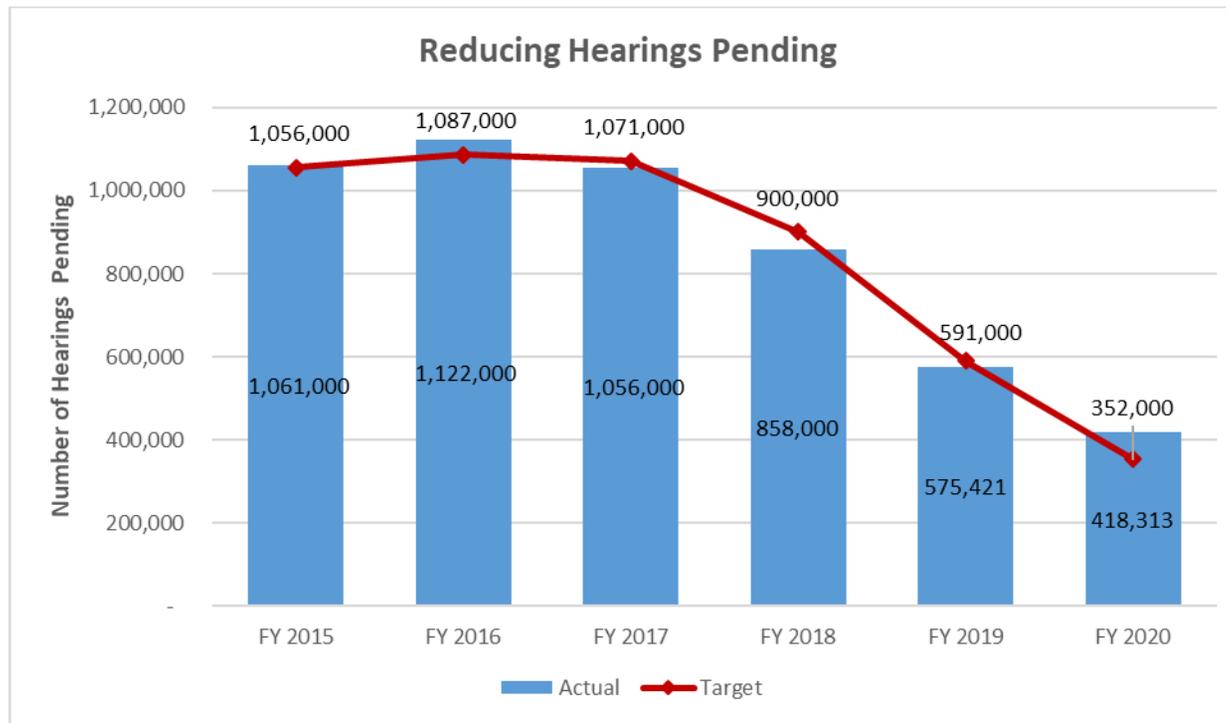


# Key Indicators

## Historical Data

Reduction in hearings pending<sup>4</sup> - The reduction in cases pending for a hearing before an ALJ.

- FY 2020 Target: We plan to reduce our pending to 352,000.
- FY 2021 Target: We plan to reduce our pending to 259,000.

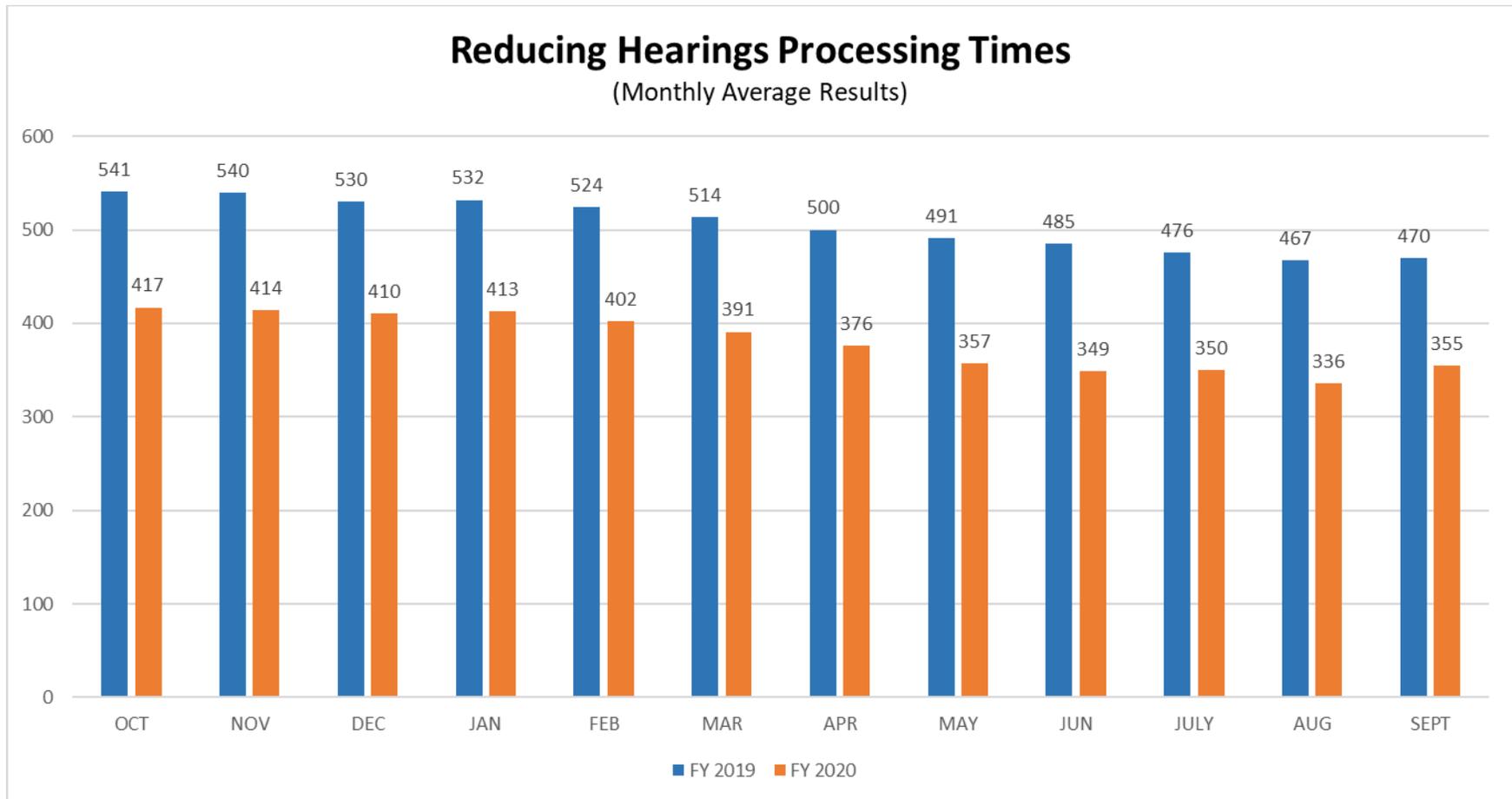


<sup>4</sup> This target is also a budgeted workload measure (BWM) and as such are estimates. BWM estimates are updated each year with the President's Budget. The FY 2021 target will be finalized with the FY 2021 enacted appropriation.

# Key Indicators

## Secondary Indicator: Hearings Average Processing Time

- FY 2020 Target: 380 days
- FY 2020 Results: 386 days



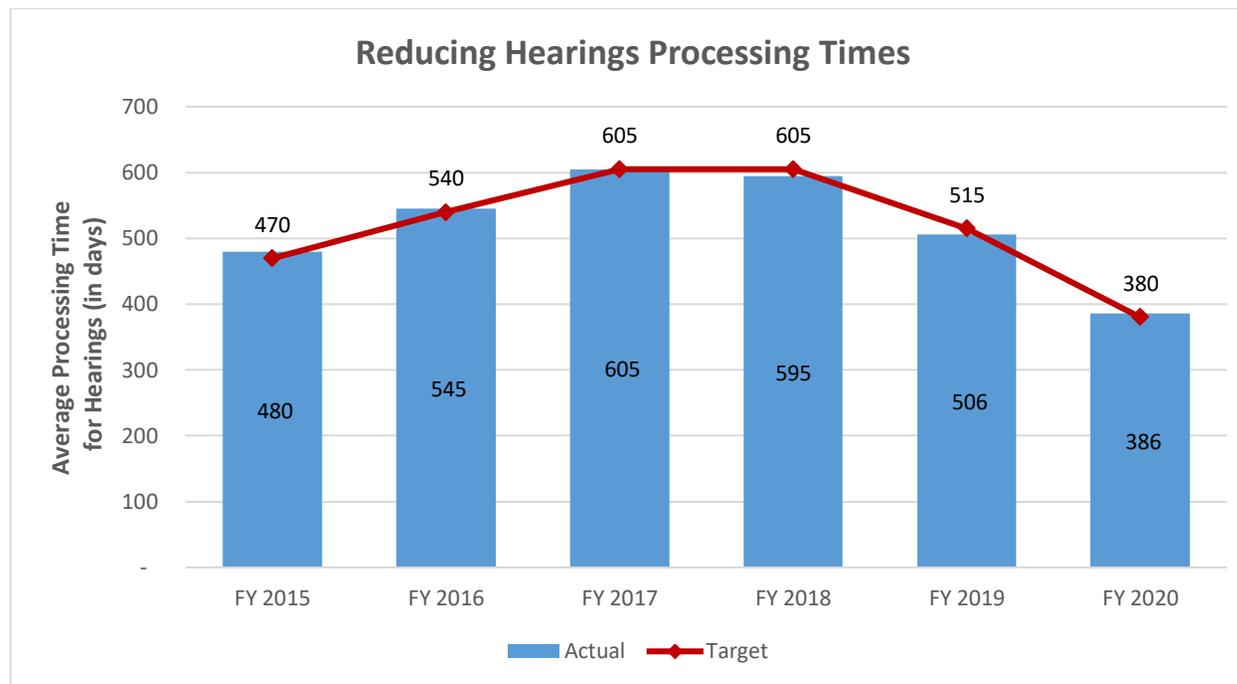
# Key Indicators

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## Historical Data

Reduction in APT<sup>5</sup> - The reduction in the average time a claimant waits from the date the hearing request to the date the hearing decision is issued.

- FY 2020 Target: We plan to reduce our APT to 380 days.
- FY 2021 Target: We plan to reduce our APT to 260 days.



<sup>5</sup> This target is also a BWM and as such are estimates. BWM estimates are updated each year with the President's Budget. The FY 2021 target will be finalized with the FY 2021 enacted appropriation.

# Assumptions and Risks

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We have identified the following assumptions for accomplishing the goal. We have also identified the following risks that could affect our progress along with mitigation plans to address these risks.

## Assumptions

Normal levels of ALJ and support staff attrition

Steady pipeline of disability claim receipts without any dramatic increase

Funding for overtime and replacement hiring as needed

## 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 of our control

We would maximize effective use of overtime and move work to other hearing offices to balance workloads.

# Data Accuracy and Reliability

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Our hearings workload data comes from our Case Processing Management System (CPMS) 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 270 days old or older and 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 as the Target Age Summary report, but with more detail, including a listing of all current aged cases that can be sorted by various factors such as filing date, region, office, or status, to name a few. DART will help us identify specific problem cases, so we can give them individualized attention to ensure they are processed timely.

# Additional Information

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## Stakeholders

**Congress:** Our Office of Hearings Operations meets with Congressional committees quarterly to discuss our CARES Plan and associated initiatives, and we use their feedback on the plan 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.

**Claimant Advocacy and Disability Advocacy Organizations:** These organizations advocate for the rights of the disabled and individuals who apply for disability.

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