

Social Security Speeds Disability Claims Review

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<?xml version="1.0"?> Social Security speeds disability claims review JIM ABRAMS Associated Press Writer The Associated Press

WASHINGTON_People with cancers and other severe medical conditions will get quicker action on disability claims under a new Social Security program.

The time needed to decide claims could trim from 100 days or more to as few as two, said Michael J. Astrue, who heads the Social Security Administration. The Compassionate Allowances initiative will apply to 25 rare diseases and 25 cancers, and may be expanded later, the agency said Monday.

"This is something that I've believed in for a long, long time," Astrue said in an interview before the announcement. His father received disability benefits because of a rare form of brain cancer.

The program focuses on diseases where the conditions are so severe or the treatment so difficult that that the person making the claim obviously cannot continue working. Astrue said the agency can approve many claims solely on confirmation of the diagnosis. Those include acute leukemia, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and pancreatic cancer.

Among others on the list are inoperable forms of breast, bladder, kidney and bone cancer; Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease; Gaucher disease; and Rett Syndrome.

At a public hearing on the program last spring, Dr. Edward Benz, president of the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, said 1.4 million cases of cancer are expected to be diagnosed this year and a significant number of cancer patients are uninsured or underinsured.

"Coupled with an inability to perform work given the disabling impact of their diseases, the financial impacts to these patients and their families are enormous," he said.

Depending on the nature of the claim, a decision from the agency can take months. Getting a hearing for an appeal may take longer, more than a year at times.

This year the agency began a rapid action process whereby computers scan for key terms that make it 95 percent certain a claim will be accepted.

Together with the new program based on specific diseases, the agency estimates the two-track system will result in a decision for 6 percent to 9 percent of disability cases, for as many as 250,000 people, in a matter of days.

Even with the speedier processing, there will be no change in the law under which claimants must wait five months before getting benefits. Those receiving approval may have shorter periods to wait because the five-month period begins from the onset of the disability.

The Social Security Disability Insurance program for the past half-century has paid monthly benefits to disabled workers and certain family members who have worked long enough and paid Social Security taxes. The Social Security Administration this year will receive about 2.6 million disability claims.

On the Net:

Social Security program: <http://tinyurl.com/6affuy>

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