

Report to the federal Parliament:

Timely processing of benefits to persons with a disability

In its report to the federal Parliament the Court examined why applications for benefits to persons with a disability are often processed late. Although the department succeeded in shortening the period needed by about three months in 2010 causes for such a delay are still numerous and complex. According to the Court it is practicable to comply with the time limits set by the law if reforms are pursued and if the remaining bottlenecks are addressed. The Social Security department and the State Secretary responsible for disability said they subscribe to the Court's findings and recommendations.

Financial benefits to persons with a disability are allocated by the Social Security department. For many years the processing of applications for benefits has taken much longer than the time limit set by law in spite of the fact that from 2010 on it was shortened from eight to six months. The long processing time is not only detrimental to the target group but it also causes the federal authorities to pay huge interests for delayed payments. Moreover in the medium term, the number of applications is expected to increase. Therefore the Court has decided to carry out an audit of how timely applications are processed. This has provided the following results.

The office within the department responsible for processing the applications has already carried out drastic reforms these last few years. In 2009 these adjustments seriously affected the organisation and did not yet produce favourable effects on the processing times. For the months February to December 2009 the processing time needed for the files examined took on average 9,4 months. The new 6-month legal time limit set for 2010 was complied with for only one third of all first applications that were approved in 2009. While the audit was underway the office took some further steps so that the average processing time was already shortened to 6,7 months in August 2010.

Nevertheless, causes for delay are still numerous, they involve various stakeholders and cannot not all be remedied in the short term. This complex situation partly explains why the office's past efforts have not yet sufficiently yielded fruit and why the legal time limit has not yet been complied with for a large number of application files.

Causes for the delay are partly to be found outside the office concerned:

- Issues inherent in the regulation such as the requirement to check the income or the heterogeneity of the target group;
- The high percentage of undue and discontinued applications and the sometimes long waiting time before information is obtained from the applicant himself;
- The deficient and not yet fully automated data exchange with other state departments;
- The insufficient coupling between the central Information and Communication Technology service of the Social Security department and the responsible directorate general.

There are also major causes for delay within the directorate general :

- Procedures and work practices vary widely in their application among work stations dealing with the administrative procedure and among medical centers in the provinces carrying out the medical checks.
- The communication within as well as between the various services is deficient, good practices are not identified or spread across the whole organization.
- Management information with regard to the processes carried out is sometimes still missing.
- Performance varies strongly across work stations and within work stations too as some collaborators process much more files a day than others.
- ICT is in part no more suited to the new procedures and the users' needs. ICT projects' follow-up is not optimal.

In the Court's view higher efficiency can be attained through increased computerization of processes while satisfying to the following constraints. The directorate general's collaborators need to be sufficient skilled and ready to implement the computer applications. Adjustments made to the ICT system should be prepared and planned very carefully so as to minimize efficiency loss during the migration phase (for instance at the premature stage).

The extent to which the applications are checked affects the length of processing time needed. The Court found that checks differ strongly among work stations and among medical centres although these differences are not justified by a risk analysis. An equal treatment of all applicants is therefore insufficiently guaranteed.

The Court's view is that it is practicable to comply with the time limit prescribed by the law if the ongoing initiatives for change are pursued and the remaining bottlenecks are addressed.

The Social Security department said it subscribed to nearly all of the Court's recommendations. The State secretary responsible for disability also said he subscribed to these conclusions and recommendations.