

On-line Access to the Social Security Disability Claim File

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Just a few short years ago, Social Security disability claim files were *paper*, and getting a copy of the claim file meant literally making a photocopy of the file. You still see paper files every now and then, but they are the exception rather than the rule.

Most claim files are now *electronic*, meaning that the documents in the claim file are stored electronically, and reside in Social Security's vast database. A copy of the disability claim file is provided to the claimant or claimant's representative by via a CD. The whole file is on the CD, which takes up much less space than a paper file.

The CDs are a huge improvement from the old paper file days. The downside is that some hearing offices are better than others when it comes to providing current copies of those CDs. The Portland, Maine hearing office is particularly good about providing updated CDs. You receive a CD upon intake at the hearing office, and an updated version when the claim is ready to schedule; another CD is sent 15 days ahead of the hearing, and a CD is made on the day of the hearing and provided to the representative to review and use at the hearing.

On-line Access

Most recently, Social Security has been rolling out *on-line access* to disability claim files. This service is for registered claimant representatives only; it is not for the individual claimant. I signed up at my local ODAR a couple months ago, and have been using it regularly since. For security purposes, each time you access the system on-line, Social Security sends a text message to your cell phone with a one-time numerical password needed to log on. So you need internet access and a suitable mobile phone to use the new service.

I have found some distinct advantages and a few disadvantages with on-line access.

The Pros:

- You have immediate access to any claim file at the hearing level after your Appointment of Representative (form 1696) has been processed. I can look at a new disability file *right away*, before I would have received a CD of the file from the hearing office.
- Downloading a copy of the file is a fairly simple procedure. And a pdf copy is available. I prefer a pdf copy over the tiff files that are on the CDs. A pdf is much easier to navigate.
- You can look at a file *any time*. All you need is internet access, and the claimant's Social Security number, and your mobile phone. So I can check a file at night from home without difficulty.
- You get access to the *live file*. You are not looking at the file as it was on the day the CD was created. It is quite reassuring to look at the file on-line a couple days ahead of the hearing and see all your evidence and your hearing brief there.

The Cons:

- Only one representative at a time has on-line access to the file. If you are not the sole designated representative, you can't access the file on-line. So for firms with more than one lawyer, it makes it difficult to share work on a case.
- Staff is not permitted on-line access. This is a deal-breaker for many offices, and the issue needs to be addressed by the SSA before the internet becomes the prevalent method of providing access to a file. For my office, it means I have to access the file and download a copy for anyone else to work on the claim.

Overall, I have had an excellent experience with the new on-line access program, and I urge other Social Security disability attorneys to sign up for the program.