

**Statement of
Hal Daub, Chairman
Social Security Advisory Board
to the
Great Lakes Association of Disability Examiners
Columbus, Ohio
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I am very happy to be here with you this afternoon. I am a bit sorry that your conference was not scheduled for last week. Last week, as you may know, was Public Service Recognition Week. I certainly would like to add my recognition and that of the Social Security Advisory Board for the fine public service that all of you provide for the disabled people of this country.

I believe that the employees of the Social Security Administration and the State Disability Determination services provide one of the Nation's most outstanding examples of dedicated service, often under trying circumstances, and often—too often—with inadequate resources. But I would like to particularly recognize those, like you, who go the extra mile by joining and participating in organizations like NADE to improve your skills and knowledge and enhance your capacity to bring to the determination of disability the level of expertise that such a crucial finding demands. I am always impressed when I receive my issue of your national publication, the NADE Advocate, to see the excellent mix of medical articles and articles which enable you to keep abreast of legislative, administrative, and other developments relating to the disability programs. I would also like to commend your fine national leadership for the outstanding job they do in representing you and in communicating your views to those of us who serve on the Advisory Board, to the agency, and to other professional organizations involved in the Social Security programs.

Since its creation by a law passed in 1994, the Social Security Advisory Board has spent a lot of time and effort looking at the disability aspects of the Social Security and SSI programs. We talked with program administrators at headquarters and in regional offices. We visited Disability Determination Services throughout the country and met with and listened to disability examiners, medical consultants, and program managers. We also met with managers and employees in other parts of the program: field offices, hearing offices, the Appeals Council. Our reviews found much that needed improvement and we issued several reports. In fact, in January 2001, we characterized the disability program as in need of fundamental change.

As you know, many of the issues that the Board raised in its reports are being addressed in the changes that are taking place or are about to take place in the disability adjudication process. This is an exciting time to be involved with the Social Security disability programs. But it also is, of course, a time of some natural apprehension. And that is healthy—although difficult. We all are somewhat in the position of having heard the one shoe drop and waiting to learn where the other one will land. But, you and we have some ability to help make sure that it lands in the right place. The Advisory Board

has recognized the crucial importance of having those, like you, who actually carry out the program, consulted in the way changes are developed. And I see that happening.

Again, I want to commend NADE's leadership for developing and communicating a careful analysis of the Commissioner's proposed process changes and for suggesting ways to implement them. Your leadership has met with agency officials; they have participated in hearings and conferences; they have exchanged views and worked with other professional organizations. And, of course they have kept the Advisory Board abreast of NADE's views and concerns. I was happy to meet with your National Officers by video conference when they visited the Board's offices in March, and we have a continuing interchange between them and our staff.

I note that the theme of your conference is "Rising to Meet the Cyberspace Challenge." That, of course, is very appropriate as we are now in the early implementation phase of eDib. Coming fully into the electronic age is indeed a challenge. But, it is long overdue. The Advisory Board has been monitoring the progress of eDib very closely. Well over a year ago, we traveled to Baltimore and had an extensive discussion of the plans with the systems staff there. We listened to and heard many concerns that were expressed by DDS directors, field office staff, and disability examiners. In fact, one of our Board meetings with the Commissioner of Social Security was specifically addressed to discussing those concerns with her. In October of last year, we had another meeting with SSA systems staff to get an update on the progress of eDib and in November the Board traveled to Raleigh to see for ourselves the pilot implementation and to benefit from the hands-on experience of the field office and DDS staff there.

For most of you, I understand, the full implementation of eDib is a bit out on the horizon. The exception is Illinois, which was another pilot State and is now in the roll-out phase. I'm sure you all will be talking with the delegation from Springfield to learn how it is going, and I hope they will also share that with the Board.

There have been concerns expressed about some aspects of eDib and, in particular, about the pace of implementation. That is no secret and it certainly is an important issue. At the same time, it is clear that we live in an increasingly electronic world. That world provides opportunities for gains in processing time, efficiency, and manageability that are really the key to the kinds of fundamental change that the disability programs so badly need. The Board has discussed this concern with the Commissioner of Social Security. She has made clear to us that the pace of implementation was a conscious policy decision and that she is committed to providing the resources needed to pull it off, but also ready to accept a slowdown if that should become necessary to make sure that the implementation works.

From what we saw in Raleigh and what we have heard subsequently, there are a few problem areas, but overall the eDib roll out so far seems to be pretty much on track. Of course, early returns don't always hold up, and the Board will continue to keep an eye on this process. I know that you all will be working very hard to make this much needed

advance a success, but you also need to be very open and forthcoming about making known any problems that do arise.

Beyond and dependent upon the implementation of eDib, we know that there are going to be some major changes in how the disability adjudication process operates. A little more than a half-year back, Social Security Commissioner Barnhart announced the general outlines of a new approach to handling disability claims. And she indicated that this was a statement of approach and not a detailed final blueprint. She invited all interested parties to think about these proposals and to become involved in a dialogue with each other and with her on how best to achieve the objectives of making the process faster and more fair. I know that NADE along with many other organizations and individuals has accepted the challenge, has become a part of the process of thinking through the issues, and has developed a detailed and thoughtful position.

The agency is in the process of assimilating and distilling your views and those of other participants. In fact, as people and groups continue to think about the issues, they still are sending in comments and suggestions. I know we all are anxious for the next step—to see how the agency will shape its original approach, now informed by all the thoughtful views it has received from you and others, into a firm, detailed proposal. I don't know exactly when that step will come, but I am confident that it will be based on a desire to bring about true reform of the disability processes. Of course, when that detailed proposal is developed and presented, the Advisory Board will be carefully examining it and its implementation. And your organization will continue to play a very important role helping both SSA and the Board to make sure that the changes will serve the overriding goal which is to meet the needs of the public and the disabled for expeditious, accurate, and consistent adjudication.

Although there is no question that electronic files and changes in the disability process are important to the future of disability program, these changes will be of little value unless the disability program has adequate staff that are skilled and well trained. Human capital is SSA's single most important resource. The future success of the disability program depends on adequate staffing levels that can efficiently manage a growing workload and a skilled workforce that can make increasingly complex disability decisions. The Board has long been concerned about the critical issues of resources and training. In a report we issued in 2001, we said that maintaining a strong staff to carry out the complex responsibilities of the agency ranked near the top of the challenges facing the agency and we noted that:

“Much more attention needs to be given to providing employees in SSA and in the State disability agencies with high quality, ongoing training. The need is particularly urgent for those adjudicating disability claims. At the present time the training for these employees is highly fragmented and varies greatly from one part of the disability structure to another.”

The General Accounting Office has echoed many of the Board's concerns, pointing out that DDSs are facing an impending retirement wave of the examiner staff

and increased competition for qualified staff. A January GAO report based on a survey of DDS Directors cites three specific issues:

1. A high turnover rate averaging 13 percent in 2000 to 2002 with 20 DDSs having a rate above 20 percent;
2. Widespread difficulties in recruiting and hiring examiners, often because of state-imposed compensation limits; and
3. Inadequate levels of training, primarily because resources were stretched too thin by high workloads to allow sufficient time for training.

I know you are well aware of the need for attention to these human capital issues. I think the recent NADE position paper describing the role and requirements of the disability examiner position is very helpful in documenting the complexity of your task and the importance of adequate resources and training. The Social Security Advisory Board will continue to monitor DDS resources and actively support the budget that the disability program needs to meet its ongoing challenges. The Board has strongly supported the Commissioner's service delivery budget that seeks to provide funding not only to handle the growing workloads but also reduce the backlogs of pending disability claims. In support of that budget, I recently sent letters, on behalf of the Board, to the leaders of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees and Subcommittees urging them to make available adequate administrative funding for the disability program.

The conversion to an electronic process, the Commissioner's process reform approach, and attention to human capital and resource needs—all of these are essential to restoring the kind of prompt, efficient, accurate, and consistent administration that should be the hallmark of the Social Security disability programs. But as we deal with these urgent issues in the near term, we also need to be re-examining the basic definition of disability that drives the entire structure of our disability programs. The Social Security disability programs were created a half-century ago. In many ways, that was a different world from what we see today. And, in particular, for those with impairments it was a very different world. In the intervening 50 years, medical science has made great advances. We have developed wonderful rehabilitative technologies and learned much about the techniques of rehabilitation. The nature and physical requirements of work have changed substantially as we have moved from an economy based on heavy industry to much more of a service economy.

Above all, our attitudes about disability have changed. Fifty years ago, it seemed appropriate—as the Social Security definition does—to focus on inability to work. Today, our national policy towards the disabled is better reflected in the Americans with Disabilities Act that focuses on enabling those with impairments to attain the maximum feasible level of independence and self support.

Over the past year, the Social Security Advisory Board has spent a great deal of time and thought examining this issue. We recognize that the existing Social Security disability programs are a very important part of our nation's system of economic security for those with severe disabilities. Any changes that might be considered must be careful

and thoughtful and must not undermine the important protections those programs provide. At the same time, however, it is clear that there is something fundamentally inconsistent in having a national policy that promotes self-sufficiency and a definition of disability that requires individuals to prove to the government—and, therefore to themselves—that they absolutely cannot do any substantial work.

In our study of the issue, we found that there have been many, many attempts to build into the program offsetting incentives to work. In fact, there are so many different incentive provisions that they sometimes are confusing. But, what is worse, they do not seem to have very substantial results in overcoming the fundamental contradiction which the definition establishes.

Last October, we published a report containing the results of our examination of the Social Security definition. That study recognized that this is not a simple issue for which easy answers present themselves. At the same time, the Board concluded that this is a serious issue and that there is widespread dissatisfaction with the existing situation. We urged the need to begin taking a serious look at how we can find a workable solution.

In April, to contribute towards that process, we sponsored an all-day forum with presentations from experts with a variety of view points. We had a large and diverse audience including academic experts, representatives of organizations for the disabled, congressional staff, and a number of people from SSA and from State DDSs, including your national president. We invited those in the audience to participate in the discussion and many of them did so. We plan to issue a report summarizing the proceedings. Meanwhile, however, all of the formal presentations are available on our website, along with our October 2003 report. I invite you to visit the website and I would welcome having you send us your views and reactions. Our website address is SocialSecurityAdvisoryBoard.gov.

I very much appreciate your inviting me to come here to visit with you today. I hope I have made clear the high regard that the Advisory Board has for you and your leadership. We know the difficult and important work that you do in serving the disabled people of this country. The Advisory Board exists because Congress felt it was important to have a group of individuals who could take a look at the program from an independent perspective and could give advice to the Congress, the President, and the Commissioner that might be helpful in improving the program and its operations. In trying to accomplish that objective, we have been very fortunate to have contact with people like you who work on the front-lines of the program and who have been willing to share with us your thoughtful and candid views. I look forward very much to continuing to work with you in the future to improve our Nation's system of Social Security.