



**AALJ**

Association of  
Administrative  
Law Judges

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## **N E W S   R E L E A S E**

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## **Hearing on Social Security Disability Claims can now be held Via Video, over the Phone or in Person after Judges Voluntarily Agree to Resume in-Person Hearings**

*In-person hearings had been put on hold for 22 months*

**WASHINGTON** -- The Association of Administrative Law Judges (AALJ), the union representing the 1,025 judges who hear cases related to Social Security disability claims and related issues, announced today that it has reached an agreement with the Social Security Administration (SSA) to resume in-person disability hearings.

While hundreds of thousands of hearings have been held by administrative law judges over the phone or via video since the start of the pandemic, in-person services at hearing offices and Social Security field offices have largely been suspended due to the risk of spreading covid to claimants and applicants, many of whom are disproportionately older or in poorer health than the general population.

“Our judges understand that not everyone wants to opt for a virtual hearing,” said Judge Som

Ramrup, who hears Social Security cases in New York City and recently was elected president of the AALJ.

“If workers lose their income and are denied disability claims after years of paying into the Social Security system, it’s understandable that they may want to make their case in person, in a hearing room and before a judge,” she said. “We wanted to find a way to accommodate those requests, to resume holding in-person hearings and to do it safely. This agreement will allow a return to the hearing room while still maintaining the option of holding hearings through electronic means.”

Prior to the pandemic, 15 million Americans, including children, received disability benefits from the Social Security Administration. It’s estimated that among today’s 20-year-olds, one in four will become disabled before the end of their work lives.

Social Security disability beneficiaries are more than three times as likely to die in a year as other people the same age. Among those who start receiving disability benefits at the age of 55, one in six men and one in eight women die within five years of the onset of their disabilities.

Many of those who have filed for and been denied Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits and/or Supplemental Security Income, a program for indigent Americans, are in poor health, have lost income and are desperate for a hearing.

“While covid is still a threat, it’s important that we continue to offer hearings over the telephone and through videoconferencing,” explained Judge Ramrup. “Many of our claimants have medical conditions that make traveling and appearing at in-person hearings an untenable risk.”

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, SSA judges have reduced the pending hearing numbers from over 575,000 (the number at the start of fiscal year 2020 just before the start of the pandemic) to a current number of about 352,000.

“Our judges have shown a commitment to serving the public despite this unprecedented pandemic and are now available to offer in-person hearings,” Judge Ramrup said.

A memorandum of understanding to resume in-person hearings was reached just before the start of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday weekend. The agreement ensures both access to the judicial system and safety to judges and those attending hearings. Among the safety measures outlined in the agreement are requirements for masking, social distancing, and the installation of plexiglass barriers and HEPA air filtration purifiers in each hearing room.

Judge Ramrup said that negotiations with SSA’s managers were very productive and commended Acting Commissioner Kilolo Kijakazi for listening to judges’ safety concerns and helping craft a solution that serves both the needs of judges and the vulnerable public in SSA hearing rooms.

“It’s important that at this critical time, when the pandemic makes the social safety net more important than ever, judges and Social Security managers work closely together to serve the American people in a timely manner and with options that allow them to feel safe and secure.”

**The Association of Administrative Law Judges (AALJ) was founded as a professional association in 1971 to promote knowledge and collegiality among judges. Today AALJ represents the approximately 1,025 judges who handle Social Security Disability claims. AALJ provides training and education programs for judges, serves as an advocate for judges and represents the issues of judges before Congress. A recognized federal employees union, AALJ bargains on behalf of its members with the Social Security Administration. AALJ is an affiliate of the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers and the AFL-CIO.**

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