



BRIEFLY...

COVID-19: OWCP SHOULD CONTINUE TO CLOSELY MONITOR IMPACT ON CLAIMS PROCESSING

July 6, 2020

WHY OIG CONDUCTED THE AUDIT

On January 31, 2020, the Secretary for Health and Human Services declared a nationwide public health emergency in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. As of June 22, 2020, there have been over 2 million confirmed COVID-19 cases in the United States, and social distancing mandates have caused mass disruption to the economy and peoples' lives in every state.

As part of Phase 1 of the OIG's Pandemic Oversight Response Plan, this report presents the results of our audit of the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs' (OWCP) initial response to the pandemic.

WHAT OIG DID

We conducted a performance audit to answer the following question:

To what extent has COVID-19 affected OWCP's ability to process and adjudicate claims, and what has OWCP done to address challenges encountered?

To answer this question, we conducted interviews with agency officials and reviewed plans, guidance, performance data, and other related documentation.

READ THE FULL REPORT

<http://www.oig.dol.gov/public/reports/oa/2020/19-20-004-04-001.pdf>

WHAT OIG FOUND

We found that most OWCP programs are experiencing or expecting delays and resource management issues as a result of increasing claims or social distancing mandates brought on by the pandemic. In response, the programs are tracking delays, providing guidance, extending deadlines, and taking additional actions as needed. Specifically:

The Division of Federal Employees' Compensation (DFEC) is expecting a potential strain on resources and claims processing delays. To address these potential challenges, DFEC developed a contingency plan, issued new procedures for handling COVID-19 claims, and created a COVID-19 Task Force to oversee claims development and adjudication.

The Division of Coal Mine Workers' Compensation (DCMWC) is experiencing challenges in its ability to process claims timely because a significant number of approved physicians have temporarily suspended pulmonary examinations, which are required for a coal miner's claim to be processed. These delays are creating a backlog that could strain resources when physicians resume claimant examinations. DCMWC is tracking the delays and has taken steps to assist claimants, including publishing guidance on its website and extending deadlines.

The Division of Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation (DEEOIC) is experiencing delays in obtaining required information from certain Department of Energy facilities and physicians who have closed or limited operations during the pandemic. DEEOIC is tracking a small number of impacted claims and allowing for extensions in these cases.

The Division of Longshore and Harbor Workers' Compensation (DLHWC) has not experienced, nor is it expecting, any significant impact from the COVID-19 pandemic.

WHAT OIG RECOMMENDED

The OIG made recommendations related to monitoring, guidance, and performance measurement. OWCP agreed with them.