



Disability Judges Urge Social Security Administration to Adopt Coronavirus Prevention Recommendations

WASHINGTON — March 10, 2020 — The [Association of Administrative Law Judges](#) (AALJ), which represents approximately 1,300 judges across 163 offices who preside in Social Security disability hearings across the U.S., is asking the Social Security Administration (SSA) to take more proactive and forceful steps to protect the public and employees during the coronavirus outbreak.

The AALJ Health and Safety Committee, understanding that many of the claimants at hearings are over 50 and often dealing with underlying health issues, has asked SSA to implement these changes:

- Alert claimants that they'll be granted a telephone hearing if they have symptoms of or have been exposed to the virus, including through international travel.
- Suggest that claimants have the option of requesting a telephone hearing the same day of their hearing if they recently had symptoms of or were exposed to the virus.
- Empower judges to directly grant telephone hearings if requested by claimants or if symptoms are exhibited in the hearing room.
- Direct staff to ask claimants and their representatives if they've had symptoms, including fever or chronic cough, so a postponement or phone hearing can be offered.

To date, the SSA has rejected all these recommendations. Instead, the administration has maintained that only a hearing office chief administrative law judge can grant a phone hearing and has implemented a Work at Home by Quarantine Policy.

AALJ President Judge Melissa McIntosh asked Associate Commissioner of the Office of Labor-Management and Employee Relations James Julian to provide the policy in writing; Julian said he would take the request "under advisement." When SSA California Regional Chief Judge Jennifer Horne was asked to provide the written policy statement she read during a regionwide conference call, she confirmed that headquarters prohibited its release.

Every day, these administrative law judges preside over disability hearings with claimants and their representatives, who sit in a common waiting area until they are called for their hearings.

"We emphatically urge the Social Security Administration to put the health of the American public first and immediately implement commonsense suggestions. Many claimants in our hearing rooms and offices report they have compromised immunity and could be particularly at risk for the coronavirus. As administrative law judges, we take the health and safety of the claimants, representatives and our colleagues very seriously. We feel we are being left with uncertainty and a lack of support by agency leaders," says McIntosh.

The latest details about coronavirus are available at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html.

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