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RRB Reports Performance Under Customer Service Plan

The U.S. Railroad Retirement Board's Customer Service Plan promotes the principles and objectives of customer-driven quality service agency-wide. The RRB's plan lays out the standards and expresses the time frames in terms of when the agency is required to make its decision to pay or deny an application for benefits. The plan states specifically the level of service that customers can expect, and an important part of the plan is a pledge to keep beneficiaries informed of how well the RRB is meeting the plan's standards. The agency reviews and updates the plan periodically as the agency compares its service with the best in business and considers feedback from its customers.

The following questions and answers provide information about the RRB's performance in the key areas of retirement applications, survivor applications, disability applications and payments, and railroad unemployment and sickness benefit applications and claims during fiscal year 2019 (October 1, 2018 – September 30, 2019). Included are the customer service performance goals the RRB set for fiscal year 2019. These goals may be revised annually based on such factors as projected workloads and available resources. Also included is information on the RRB's overall performance, as measured by the timeliness index developed by the agency.

1. How does the RRB measure overall timeliness for customer service?

The RRB developed an index to measure the overall timeliness of its customer service in four benefit areas: retirement applications; survivor applications; disability applications and payments; and railroad unemployment and sickness benefit applications and claims. This composite indicator, based on a weighted average, allows for a more concise and meaningful presentation of its customer service efforts in these benefit areas.

2. How timely, overall, was the customer service provided by the RRB in fiscal year 2019, as measured by this timeliness index?

During fiscal year 2019, the overall benefit timeliness index was 98.6 percent. This means that the RRB provided benefit services within the periods in the Customer Service Plan 98.6 percent of the time. The timeliness index for retirement applications, survivor applications, disability applications and payments only, the processing of which includes considerable manual intervention, is 90.5 percent. The timeliness index for railroad unemployment and sickness benefit applications and claims only, a highly automated process, is 99.9 percent.

3. What standards did the RRB use in fiscal year 2019 for processing applications for railroad retirement annuities and how well did it meet those standards?

For fiscal year 2019, the RRB had two timeliness standards for processing railroad retirement annuities. For railroad retirement annuity applications filed in advance of an applicant's eligibility date, the RRB's standard was that it would make a decision to pay or deny the application within the 35 days of the requested annuity beginning

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date. For applications filed after the eligibility date, the RRB's timeliness standard was that it would make a decision within 60 days of the filing date. The RRB's goals in fiscal year 2019 were 94 percent timeliness for both advance filing and non-advance filing applications.

Of the cases processed during fiscal year 2019, the RRB made a decision within 35 days of their annuity beginning dates on 95.4 percent of applicants who filed in advance. The average processing time for these cases was 14.7 days.

Of the cases processed during fiscal year 2019, the RRB made a decision within 60 days of their filing dates on 96.5 percent of applicants who had not filed in advance. In these cases, the average processing time was 17.5 days.

4. What standards did the RRB use for survivor benefits application processing in fiscal year 2019?

The timeliness standard for fiscal year 2019 for a railroad retirement survivor annuity applicant not already receiving benefits as a spouse, was that the RRB would make a decision to pay, deny, or transfer the application to the Social Security Administration within 60 days of the applicant's annuity beginning date, or the date the application was filed, whichever was later. For an applicant that was already receiving a spouse annuity, the RRB's standard for fiscal year 2019 was that the RRB would make a decision to pay, deny, or transfer the application for a survivor annuity to the Social Security Administration within 30 days of the first notice of the employee's death. For an applicant who filed for a lump-sum death benefit, the RRB's standard for fiscal year 2019 was to make a decision to pay or deny the application within 60 days of the date the application was filed. The goal for fiscal year 2019 was 94 percent timeliness for processing both initial survivor applications and spouse-to-survivor conversions. For processing applications for lump-sum death benefits, the goal was 97 percent.

Of the cases considered during fiscal year 2019, the RRB made a decision within 60 days of the later of the annuity beginning date or the date the application was filed in 96.0 percent of the applications for an initial survivor annuity. In cases where the survivor was already receiving a spouse annuity, a decision was made within 30 days of the first notice of the employee's death in 96.6 percent of the cases. In addition, a decision was made within 60 days of the date the application was filed in 97.3 percent of the applications for a lump-sum death benefit. The combined average processing time for all initial survivor applications and spouse-to-survivor conversions was 13 days. The average processing time for lump-sum death benefit applications was 11 days.

5. What standards did the RRB use for processing applications for disability annuities under the Railroad Retirement Act in fiscal year 2019?

Under the Customer Service Plan, for applications filed for a disability annuity in fiscal year 2019, the RRB's standard was to make a decision to pay or deny a benefit within 100 days of the date the application was filed. If it was determined that the applicant was entitled to disability benefits, the applicant would receive his/her first payment within 25 days of the date of the RRB's decision, or the earliest payment date, whichever is later. The agency's goals were 70 percent and 94 percent timeliness, respectively, for disability decisions and disability payments.

Of the cases processed during fiscal year 2019, the RRB made a decision within 100 days of the date an application was filed on 12.5 percent of those filing for a disability annuity. The average processing time was 348.9 days. Of those entitled to disability benefits, 85.2 percent received their first payment within the Customer Service Plan's time standard. The average processing time was 17.4 days.

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6. What were the standards in fiscal year 2019 for the handling of applications and claims for railroad unemployment and sickness benefits and how well did the RRB meet these standards?

For fiscal year 2019, the RRB's standard for processing an application for unemployment or sickness benefit was that the RRB would release a claim form or a denial letter within 10 days of receiving an application. If an applicant filed a claim for subsequent biweekly unemployment or sickness benefits, the RRB's standard was to certify a payment or release a denial letter within 10 days of the date the RRB received the claim form. The agency's goals for processing unemployment and sickness applications in fiscal year 2019 were, respectively, 99.5 and 99.3 percent timeliness. The payment or decision goal for subsequent claims was 98 percent timeliness.

During fiscal year 2019, 99.8 percent of unemployment benefit applications sampled for timeliness and 98.8 percent of sickness benefit applications processed met the RRB's standard. Average processing times for unemployment and sickness benefit applications were 0.8 and 3.3 days, respectively.

In addition, 99.9 percent of subsequent claims processed for unemployment and sickness benefits met the RRB's standard for fiscal year 2019. The average processing time for claims was 4.4 days.

7. How did the RRB's performance in meeting its standards in fiscal year 2019 compare to its performance in fiscal year 2018?

Fiscal year 2019 performance met or exceeded fiscal year 2018 performance in the areas of retirement benefits, whether filed in advance or not, spouse-to-survivor conversions, disability decisions, unemployment applications, and unemployment and sickness benefit claims.

Average processing times in fiscal year 2019 equaled or improved fiscal year 2018 processing times in the areas of railroad retirement applications, whether filed in advance or not, and unemployment applications. For fiscal year 2019, the agency met or exceeded all of the customer service performance goals it had set for the year, except in the areas of sickness applications, and disability decisions and payments.

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