

# OWCP changes and the pandemic



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**W**hat a long, strange year it's been. As the United States stumbled to respond to the coronavirus pandemic, federal agencies scrambled to adapt to shelter-in-place orders. The once-bustling streets in Washington, DC, went silent as thousands of federal workers stopped commuting and were forced to work from home.

Due to a history of telework, claims examiners working for the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP) were more adaptable than other federal workers. Claims processing has generally continued at a normal pace.

However, when the pandemic hit in March, OWCP was in the midst of changing the contractor that processes medical billing and authorizations, causing a cavalcade of problems.

**Contracting out federal work has been a goal of anti-government activists for decades.** The popular claim that the competition inherent in the private sector is vastly more efficient than the federal government has been on brilliant display (not!) over the last six months. Just-in-time supply chains that have kept Americans awash in cheap foreign goods have been swamped by the rapid spread of the coronavirus.

With a reduced federal footprint, a lack of leadership at the highest levels of government and decades of sending our manufacturing overseas, the pandemic created a frantic search for essential medical supplies when states were forced to bid against each other for sparse, mostly foreign-made goods. When and if the smoke ever clears from this wildfire of frantic government spending, we may well learn a valuable lesson about the need for a robust federal presence in the marketplace.

In the middle of all of this, in April, OWCP rolled out a change of contractors for billing and medical authorization. The transition has been less than smooth. Clinics that had mastered OWCP billing procedures struggled to re-register with the new contractor, CNSI, delaying reimbursement and angering many. Clinic billing departments spent hours on hold waiting to talk to anyone who could help them. Doctors who had been treating injured federal workers for years considered dropping OWCP cases altogether.

NALC reached out to OWCP to offer help to doctors struggling to navigate the new system. OWCP eventually responded with an email address where doctors can seek help for billing problems: CNSIOWCPOutreach@cns-inc.com.

**Five months later, while some of the problems have been fixed, the system continues to have glitches.** Claim-

ants should direct their doctors to the CNSI outreach email address for help in navigating the system.

Problems with CNSI also have affected OWCP approval for medical procedures. Some injured workers had medical procedures approved and scheduled prior to the pandemic. When medical facilities shut down, those procedures were canceled, and doctors were required to resubmit for medical authorizations with the new contractor. Some workers continue to wait for approval of medical procedures.

Part of the problem is that the previous contractor allowed doctors to fax medical authorization requests. The new contractor requires that medical authorization requests be emailed. Doctors who had previously faxed in requests need to resubmit the requests via email.

**In another disturbing development, the mailing address for OWCP has changed twice over the last few months, creating more headaches for claimants and doctors.** A couple of months ago, the longtime contractor that received and scanned claim documents in London, KY, was being phased to a new location in San Antonio, TX.

Newer claim documents had the San Antonio address, and claimants were instructed to send documents and appeals there. Then suddenly, for some unknown reason, OWCP ditched the San Antonio address and went to two new addresses in London, KY.

This can be a huge problem for claimants mailing appeals to OWCP. The date an appeal is accepted is not the date it is received—it's the date the documents get scanned by the contractor. Mail bouncing from Texas to Kentucky could cause appeals to be considered untimely.

If you have an appeal that was considered untimely due to the sudden address change, contact your national business agent's office so that NALC can investigate the claim.

**As letter carriers, we like to use the mail.** Due to the current problems with OWCP's mailing addresses, claimants should use ECOMP, OWCP's web portal, to upload appeals and other documents. Instructions on how to use ECOMP can be found on the "Injured on the Job" page at nalc.org.

If you must use the mail, use OWCP's new mailing addresses.

Appeals and general correspondence should be sent to: U.S. Department of Labor, OWCP/DFEC, P.O. Box 8311, London, KY 40742-8311.

Medical bills and claimant reimbursements should be sent to: U.S. Department of Labor, OWCP/DFEC, P.O. Box 8300, London, KY 40742-8300.

We should expect federal agencies to do better and be model servants of the people. As this pandemic has shown us, investment in private-sector interests over public-sector agencies can have deadly consequences. Injured workers deserve better.