

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS & EXECUTIVE COMPENSATION ALERT

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New Rules Regarding Claims for Disability Benefits under Retirement Plans

Effective April 2, 2018, new rules will apply to disability benefits that are handled pursuant to ERISA's claims procedures. Retirement plans that provide benefits on account of disability or vest benefits as a result of disability will ordinarily be subject to these new rules. These new rules would not ordinarily apply in the event that, under the plan's provisions, a determination of disability depends entirely upon the determination made by the Social Security Administration or another independent third party.

The new rules include the following changes:

- 1. Required Notifications.** A denial of a claim, either at the initial stage or on appeal, must include, in addition to the information required under the current rules, an explanation of why the claim is being denied, including, if applicable, an explanation of why the plan did not agree with a determination made by a health care professional or the Social Security Administration that was communicated by the claimant. In addition, a notice of a denial of a claim for a disability benefit, either at the initial stage or on appeal, must include copies of internal rules, guidelines, protocols, standards or other criteria of the plan that were used in denying the claim or a statement that no such items were used. Also, an initial denial of a claim for disability benefits must include a statement that the claimant is entitled to receive, upon request, free of charge, copies of any relevant documents that were considered by the plan, and a denial of an appeal regarding a disability benefit claim must include an explanation of any limitation imposed by the plan on the period in which the denial may be contested in litigation.
- 2. Right to Review and Respond to New Information Before Final Decision on Appeal.** New requirements apply to plans that, on appeal of the denial of a disability benefit claim, consider information that was not taken into account when the claim was previously denied. In this situation, the claimant must be given notice of the new information and provided with an opportunity to respond to the plan before a decision is made with respect to the appeal.
- 3. Avoiding of Conflicts of Interest.** An employee of the plan sponsor may not be rewarded for enabling a disability benefit claim to be denied.
- 4. Deemed Completion of Claims Process.** If there is a failure by a plan to adhere to the disability claims procedures, a claimant is deemed to have exhausted the plan's administrative remedies and, therefore, is ordinarily eligible to commence litigation regarding his or her claim.

Employers should be certain that, effective April 2, 2018, their retirement plans are administered in accordance with the new rules with respect to claims for disability benefits provided by the plans.

If you have any questions regarding the new disability claims procedures, please do not hesitate to contact us.

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This edition of the Employee Benefits & Executive Compensation Alert was written by Brendan J. Butler, a member of the Employee Benefits & Pension Practice Area at Reid and Riege, P.C. The Practice Area works closely with clients to design and draft tax-qualified and nonqualified retirement plans. For information or additional copies of this Alert, or to be placed on our mailing list, please contact Brendan (tel. 860-240-1015) (e-mail bbutler@rrlawpc.com) or another member of the Practice Area, John J. Jacobson, Chair (tel. 860-240-1006) (e-mail jjacobson@rrlawpc.com), Ronald J. Koniuta (tel. 860-240-1034) (e-mail rkoniuta@rrlawpc.com), or Lori L. Underberger (tel. 860-240-1075) (e-mail lunderberger@rrlawpc.com), or the Reid and Riege attorney with whom you regularly work.

For other information regarding Reid and Riege, P.C., please visit our website at www.rrlawpc.com or contact us at Reid and Riege, P.C., One Financial Plaza, Hartford, CT 06103, or 234 Church Street, New Haven, CT 06510.

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