

Audit Report

Match of Florida Death Information
Against Social Security
Administration Records

A-08-18-50565 / August 2019

OIG

Office of the Inspector General
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

MEMORANDUM

Date: August 13, 2019 **Refer To:**

To: The Commissioner

From: Inspector General

Subject: Match of Florida Death Information Against Social Security Administration Records
(A-08-18-50565)

The attached final report presents the results of the Office of Audit's review. The objectives were to (1) determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) made payments to beneficiaries and representative payees who were deceased according to Florida Department of Health vital records and (2) identify non-beneficiaries in the State file whose death information did not appear in SSA's records.

If you wish to discuss the final report, please call me or have your staff contact Rona Lawson, Assistant Inspector General for Audit, 410-965-9700.



Gail S. Ennis

Attachment

Match of Florida Death Information Against Social Security Administration Records

A-08-18-50565



August 2019

Office of Audit Report Summary

Objectives

To (1) determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) made payments to beneficiaries and representative payees who were deceased according to Florida Department of Health vital records and (2) identify non-beneficiaries in the State file whose death information did not appear in SSA's records.

Background

To identify and prevent payments after death, SSA established a program under which States can voluntarily contract with SSA to provide it with death data to match against its records. SSA and the States developed the Electronic Death Registration (EDR) process to improve the accuracy and timeliness of death information. Through EDR, States electronically submit death reports to SSA, and SSA completes an online, real-time verification of the Social Security number. If the numberholder data match SSA records, SSA systems automatically post the State death information and terminate payments to deceased beneficiaries.

We obtained a Florida Department of Health vital records data file of the personally identifiable information of approximately 4.1 million numberholders who died in Florida from January 1990 through December 2014. We matched the data against SSA payment records and Numident.

Findings

We estimate SSA issued approximately \$36 million in payments after death to at least 474 of the 501 beneficiaries and 3 representative payees who died in Florida from January 1990 through December 2014. We estimate that identifying and correcting these discrepancies will prevent approximately \$6 million in additional improper payments after death over the next 12 months. We also identified 17,349 non-beneficiaries who were deceased according to Florida Department of Health vital records but whose death information was not in SSA's Numident.

We could not determine why the deaths were not in SSA's Numident or whether the State ever reported the deaths to SSA. According to the Florida Department of Health, the State reported approximately 98 percent of its deaths to SSA through the EDR process in 2014. However, SSA rejects EDR death reports it cannot verify to prevent posting erroneous death data to its records. To help determine the causes of unposted death information, we are planning a review that will assess the effectiveness of the EDR process.

The Numident contained death information for two of the three representative payees; however, SSA had not replaced the representative payees. In several prior audits, we found that SSA did not always replace representative payees after it posted death information to their Numident records.

Recommendations

We recommend SSA:

1. Take action on the 501 deceased beneficiaries we identified.
2. Take action on the 17,349 deceased non-beneficiaries we identified to add their deaths to the Numident, as appropriate.

SSA agreed with our recommendations.

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ABBREVIATIONS

C.F.R.	Code of Federal Regulations
EDR	Electronic Death Registration
OASDI	Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
POMS	Program Operations Manual System
Pub. L. No.	Public Law Number
SSA	Social Security Administration
SSI	Supplemental Security Income
Stat.	Statutes at Large
U.S.C.	United States Code

OBJECTIVES

Our objectives were to (1) determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) made payments to beneficiaries¹ and representative payees who were deceased according to Florida Department of Health vital records and (2) identify non-beneficiaries² in the State file whose death information did not appear in SSA's records.

BACKGROUND

To identify and prevent payments after death, section 205(r) of the *Social Security Act* requires that SSA establish a program under which States can voluntarily contract with SSA to provide it with death data to match against its records.³ Accordingly, SSA and the States developed the Electronic Death Registration (EDR) process to improve the accuracy and timeliness of death information. Through EDR, States electronically submit death reports to SSA, and SSA completes an online, real-time verification of the Social Security number. If the numberholder data match SSA records, SSA systems automatically post the State death information to the Numident, an SSA database that stores personally identifiable information for all Social Security numberholders,⁴ and terminate payments to deceased beneficiaries. EDR is not the only way SSA receives death information; it also posts death information to its records based on death reports from other sources, such as family members and funeral directors. SSA uses Numident information to create a file of death information it shares with other Federal benefit-paying agencies.

¹ We use the term "beneficiary" throughout this report in reference to Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance (OASDI) beneficiaries and/or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients in current payment status.

² Non-beneficiaries refers to deceased individuals who were not in current or suspended payment status at the time of our review.

³ *Social Security Act*, 42 U.S.C. § 405(r)(1) (govinfo.gov 2017).

⁴ SSA, POMS, GN 02602.050, A (October 30, 2017).

When a representative payee⁵ dies, SSA must replace the payee or send payments directly to the beneficiary. SSA may pay the beneficiary directly on an interim basis until it finds a suitable payee or on a permanent basis if it determines the beneficiary is capable of managing his/her own benefits.⁶ The *Social Security Act* requires that SSA establish a system of accountability for monitoring representative payees.⁷ If a representative payee dies and is not replaced, SSA cannot be sure the funds are being used to meet the beneficiary's needs, such as food, clothing, shelter, and medical care.⁸ Additionally, if another individual acts as a representative payee without SSA's knowledge, that person is not subject to SSA's financial oversight and reporting responsibilities—such as reporting events to SSA that may affect the individual's entitlement or benefit payment amount.⁹

We obtained a Florida Department of Health vital records data file of the personally identifiable information of approximately 4.1 million Social Security numberholders who died in Florida from January 1990 through December 2014. Our match of the data against SSA payment records and the Numident identified OASDI beneficiaries and SSI recipients who were in current payment status, and representative payees whose personally identifiable information matched that of a deceased individual in the Florida data file. We also identified non-beneficiaries (that is individuals who were not receiving OASDI benefits or SSI payments and whose death information did not appear in SSA's Numident). We obtained death certificates for the OASDI beneficiaries, SSI recipients, and representative payees in current payment status and provided the certificates to SSA. See Appendix A for information on our scope and methodology.

⁵ SSA appoints a representative payee to receive and manage benefit payments for individuals unable to manage their own finances because of their youth or mental and/or physical impairments. *Social Security Act*, 42 U.S.C. § 405(j) (govinfo.gov 2017) and 1383(a)(2)(A)(ii) (govinfo.gov 2017).

⁶ 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.2050(d) (govinfo.gov 2018), 416.650(d) (govinfo.gov 2018), 404.2055 (govinfo.gov 2018), and 416.655 (govinfo.gov 2018). SSA may suspend payment under 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.2011(b) and 416.611(b) if it finds paying the beneficiary directly would cause substantial harm, and the Agency cannot find a suitable alternative representative payee before the next payment is due.

⁷ *Social Security Act*, 42 U.S.C. §§ 405(j)(3)(A) and (6)(B) (govinfo.gov 2017) and 1383(a)(2)(C)(i), (F)(iv) and (G)(ii) (govinfo.gov 2017).

⁸ 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.2040(a) (govinfo.gov 2018) and 416.640(a) (govinfo.gov 2018).

⁹ 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.2035 (govinfo.gov 2018) and 416.635 (govinfo.gov 2018).

RESULTS OF REVIEW

We estimate SSA issued approximately \$36 million in payments after death to at least 474 of the 501 beneficiaries and 3 representative payees who died in Florida from January 1990 through December 2014.¹⁰ We estimate that identifying and correcting these discrepancies will prevent approximately \$6 million in additional improper payments after death over the next 12 months. We also identified 17,349 non-beneficiaries who were deceased according to Florida Department of Health vital records but whose death information was not in SSA's Numident.

We could not determine why the deaths we identified were not in SSA's Numident or whether the State ever reported the deaths to SSA. According to the Florida Department of Health, the State reported approximately 98 percent of its deaths to SSA through the EDR process in 2014. However, SSA rejects EDR death reports it cannot verify to prevent posting erroneous death data to its records. To help determine the causes of unposted death information, we are planning a review that will assess the effectiveness of the EDR process.¹¹

The Numident contained death information for two of the three representative payees; however, SSA had not replaced the representative payees. In several prior audits,¹² we found SSA did not always replace representative payees after it posted death information to their Numident records. Moreover, in a July 2019 audit, we found that SSA did not follow regulations or its policy to evaluate all beneficiaries'/recipients' ability to manage their own funds or select new representative payees, if appropriate, when the Agency was notified the current representative payees died. We estimated SSA issued approximately \$10.7 million in OASDI benefits and SSI payments to 846 deceased representative payees.¹³

¹⁰ While we took steps to ensure the death certificates for all 501 deceased beneficiaries belonged to the true numberholder, the true numberholder could be alive. See Appendix A for more information about the steps we took to determine whether the true numberholder was deceased.

¹¹ We do not assert the EDR process is the exclusive cause of unrecorded deaths on SSA records.

¹² SSA, OIG, *Deceased Representative Payees*, A-01-14-34112, (June 2015); *Follow up on the Social Security Administration's Procedures to Identify Representative Payees Who Are Deceased*, A-01-06-16054, (October 2006); and *The Social Security Administration's Procedures to Identify Representative Payees Who Are Deceased*, A-01-98-61009, (September 1999).

¹³ SSA, OIG, *Follow-up on Deceased Representative Payees*, A-01-18-50350, p. 2 (July 2019).

Payments Issued to Deceased Beneficiaries

We identified 501 current beneficiaries whose personally identifiable information matched that of a deceased individual in the Florida death data.¹⁴ We randomly selected 50 of these beneficiaries to calculate improper payments. Based on our sample results, we estimate SSA issued approximately \$36 million in payments after death to at least 474 of the 501 beneficiaries who died in Florida from January 1990 through December 2014.¹⁵ Examples follow.

- An individual receiving retirement benefits died in July 1994. SSA records did not contain a date of death and therefore retirement benefits continued. As of January 2019, SSA had issued almost \$297,000 in payments after death.
- A widow receiving survivor benefits died in June 2004. SSA records did not contain a date of death and therefore the survivor benefits continued. As of January 2019, SSA had issued over \$229,000 in payments after death.
- An individual receiving disability benefits died in October 2013. SSA records did not contain a date of death and therefore disability benefits continued until the beneficiary should have reached full retirement age when they converted to retirement benefits. As of January 2019, SSA had issued more than \$137,000 in payments after death.

Florida began reporting deaths electronically to SSA through the EDR process in 2008. Yet, as illustrated in Table 1, 93 percent of the beneficiaries SSA had improperly paid had died between 2010 and 2014.

Table 1: Beneficiaries Whose Personally Identifiable Information Matched that of a Deceased Individual in the Florida Death Data

Year of Death	Number of Beneficiaries	Percent of Total Beneficiaries
1990-1994	2	0.4
1995-1999	4	0.8
2000-2004	7	1.4
2005-2009	21	4.2
2010-2014	467	93.2
Total	501	100.0

Source: OIG Analysis of Florida Death Data.

¹⁴ At the time of our review, 1 of the 501 beneficiaries had death information posted to the Numident. However, we obtained death certificates for all 501 beneficiaries.

¹⁵ See Appendix B, Table B-2.

In February 2019, we provided the death certificates for the 501 beneficiaries to SSA so it would terminate their benefits and initiate recovery of payments made after their deaths, and refer cases with possible fraud to SSA OIG's Office of Investigations. We estimate that identifying and correcting of these discrepancies will prevent approximately \$6 million in additional improper payments after death over the next 12 months.¹⁶

Payments to Deceased Representative Payees

We identified three deceased representative payees to whom SSA had issued \$190,182 in payments after their deaths. When a representative payee dies, SSA must replace the payee or send payments directly to the beneficiary. SSA may make interim payments to the beneficiary until it finds a suitable payee or make payments permanently if it determines the beneficiary is capable of managing his/her own benefits.¹⁷

The Numident contained death information for two of the three representative payees; however, SSA had not replaced the representative payees. In several prior audits,¹⁸ we found SSA did not always replace representative payees after it posted death information to their Numident records.

In February 2019, we provided SSA with information on each of the three deceased representative payees. By April 2019, SSA had replaced one of the deceased representative payees and determined the remaining two beneficiaries were capable of receiving direct payments. By taking action on these three cases, SSA prevented \$30,024 in additional payments after death over the next 12 months.¹⁹

¹⁶ We based this estimate on the assumption that conditions will remain the same for the next 12 months. See Appendix B, Table B-3.

¹⁷ 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.2050(d) (govinfo.gov 2018), 416.650(d) (govinfo.gov 2018), 404.2055 (govinfo.gov 2018), and 416.655 (govinfo.gov 2018). SSA may suspend payment under 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.2011(b) and 416.611(b) if it finds paying the beneficiary directly would cause substantial harm, and the Agency cannot find a suitable alternative representative payee before the next payment is due.

¹⁸ See Footnote 12.

¹⁹ We based this estimate on the assumption that conditions will remain the same for the next 12 months. See Appendix B, Table B-4.

Deceased Non-beneficiaries

We identified 17,349 non-beneficiaries²⁰ who were deceased according to Florida Department of Health vital records but who did not have death information in SSA's Numident. As illustrated in Table 2, more than 25 percent of these non-beneficiaries died between 2010 and 2014.

Table 2: Non-beneficiaries by Year of Death

Year of Death	Number of Non-beneficiaries	Percent of Total Non-beneficiaries
1990-1994	3,392	19.6
1995-1999	3,790	21.8
2000-2004	3,315	19.1
2005-2009	2,425	14.0
2010-2014	4,427	25.5
Total	17,349	100.0

Source: OIG Analysis of Florida Death Data.

Resolving these discrepancies will reduce SSA's exposure to future improper payments and improve the accuracy and completeness of the death information it shares with other Federal benefit-paying agencies.²¹ In March 2019, we provided SSA with data that identified all 17,349 non-beneficiaries to take necessary action. SSA stated that, because these types of cases do not involve improper payments, their cleanup is a low priority and resource-dependent. SSA stated the earliest it could consider posting death information for these cases via the Continuing Death Data Improvement project under its Information Technology Modernization is Fiscal Year 2020. Depending on resources and system capacity, this activity could be further postponed.

²⁰ We matched Florida death records that included a validated Social Security number, name, and date of birth (per Enumeration Verification System process) against SSA's Numident. We excluded individuals who were receiving OASDI benefits or SSI payments.

²¹ Although SSA shares its death information with other Federal benefit-paying agencies, those agencies should independently verify the individual's death before they take adverse action. Also, based on January 2013 legislation, SSA was taking steps to improve the accuracy of its death information; *Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Improvement Act of 2012*, Pub. L. No. 112-248, § 5(g)(1), 126 Stat. 2390, p. 2396 (2013).

CONCLUSIONS

We determined SSA issued improper payments after death or had not recorded death information on its Numident on a small percentage of approximately 4.1 million decedents in the Florida Department of Health vital records data file. However, based on our sample results, we estimate SSA issued approximately \$36 million in payments after death to at least 474 of the 501 beneficiaries and 3 representative payees who died in Florida from January 1990 through December 2014. We estimate that identifying and correcting these discrepancies will prevent approximately \$6 million in additional improper payments after death over the next 12 months.²² In addition, posting death information to the Numidents of the individuals will reduce SSA's exposure to future improper payments and improve the accuracy and completeness of the death information the Agency shares with other Federal benefit-paying agencies.

We could not determine why the deaths were not in SSA's Numident or whether the State ever reported the deaths to SSA. According to the Florida Department of Health, the State reported approximately 98 percent of its deaths to SSA through the EDR process in 2014. However, SSA rejects EDR death reports it cannot verify to prevent posting erroneous death data to its records. For two of the three deceased representative payees, the Numident contained death information, but SSA had not replaced the representative payees. However, after we reported the three representative payees' deaths to SSA, the Agency took corrective action on each. Accordingly, we did not make a recommendation regarding the deceased representative payees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend SSA:

1. Take action on the 501 deceased beneficiaries we identified.
2. Take action on the 17,349 deceased non-beneficiaries we identified to add their deaths to the Numident, as appropriate.

AGENCY COMMENTS

SSA agreed with our recommendations. The Agency's comments are included in Appendix C.



Rona Lawson
Assistant Inspector General for Audit

²² We based this estimate on the assumption that conditions will remain the same for the next 12 months.

APPENDICES

Appendix A – SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

To accomplish our objectives, we:

- Reviewed Federal laws and regulations related to death matches with State agencies; the Social Security Administration’s (SSA) policies and procedures; and prior Office of the Inspector General reports.
- Obtained a Florida Department of Health vital records data file and identified approximately 4.1 million individuals recorded as having died in Florida from January 1990 through December 2014. We matched these records against SSA’s Enumeration Verification System and payment records and identified:
 - 501 Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance (OASDI) beneficiaries and/or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients in current payment status whose names and dates of birth matched those of deceased individuals in the Florida death data.¹
 - Reviewed SSA’s systems, Florida death data, LexisNexis, and public records as necessary.
 - Determined whether SSA (a) documented contact with the beneficiary² after the date of death in Florida records, (b) had previously determined the beneficiary was a victim of identity theft, or (c) listed two individuals on the same Numident record and the deceased individual was not the beneficiary. If so, we considered the beneficiary to be alive, and, if not, we considered the beneficiary to be deceased.
 - Obtained Florida death certificates and referred the 501 cases to SSA.
 - Three deceased representative payees with beneficiaries in current payment status as of January 2019 whose Social Security numbers, names, and dates of birth matched those of deceased individuals in the Florida death data. We obtained Florida death certificates for these three payees and referred the cases to SSA.
 - 17,349 non-beneficiaries³ whose Social Security numbers, names, and dates of birth matched those of deceased individuals in the Florida death data but whose death information was not in SSA’s Numident as of March 2019. We referred these cases to SSA.

¹ We matched the Social Security number, name, and date of birth on the Florida Department of Health vital records data file with SSA’s Numident for 408 of the 501 deceased beneficiaries. For the remaining 93 deceased beneficiaries, the name and date of birth on the Florida Department of Health vital records data file matched SSA’s Numident. However, we matched additional identifying information from the data file with SSA records to confirm that the death data belonged to the true numberholder.

² We use the term “beneficiary” throughout this report in reference to OASDI beneficiaries and/or SSI recipients in current payment status.

³ This is in reference to deceased individuals who were not in current or suspended payment status at the time of our review.

- Calculated payments issued after death for 50 randomly selected beneficiaries and the 3 representative payees and estimated our results (see Appendix B).

We conducted our audit in Birmingham, Alabama, between September 2018 and April 2019. We determined the data used for this audit were sufficiently reliable to meet our audit objectives. The primary entities audited were the Offices of the Deputy Commissioners for Operations and Systems. We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix B – SAMPLING METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

We identified 501 beneficiaries in current pay status whose personally identifiable information matched that of a deceased individual in the Florida death data file.¹ We obtained a death certificate for each of the 501 beneficiaries. From this population, we selected a random sample of 50 to determine the improper payments issued after death as of January 2019.

We determined SSA had issued the deceased beneficiaries approximately \$36 million in payments after their deaths. The following tables provide the details of our sample results and statistical projections.

Table B–1: Population and Sample Size

Description	Amounts
Population	501
Sample Size	50

Table B–2: Improper Payments to Deceased Beneficiaries

Description	Number of Deceased Beneficiaries	Improper Payments as of January 2019
Sample Results	50	\$3,585,806
Point Estimate	501	\$35,929,779
Projection – Lower Limit	474	\$30,699,364
Projection – Upper Limit	501	\$41,160,194

Note: All statistical projections are at the 90-percent confidence level.

We estimate identification and correction of these discrepancies prevented, or will prevent, approximately \$6 million in additional improper payments after death over the next 12 months, as shown in Table B–3.²

¹ The Florida Department of Health vital records data file contained personally identifiable information of approximately 4.1 million individuals who died in Florida from January 1990 through December 2014.

² We based this estimate on the assumption that conditions will remain the same for the next 12 months.

Table B–3: Improper Payments to Deceased Beneficiaries over the Next 12 Months

Description	Number of Deceased Beneficiaries	Improper Payments Avoided
Sample Results with Ongoing Payment Errors as of February 2019	49	\$625,267
Point Estimate	491	\$6,265,177
Projection – Lower Limit	457	\$5,733,712
Projection – Upper Limit	500	\$6,796,643

Note: All statistical projections are at the 90-percent confidence level.

Note: SSA suspended payments to 1 of the 50 sampled beneficiaries in February 2019 for development of a correct address. The remaining 49 beneficiaries were in current payment status in February 2019.

We identified three deceased representative payees. As of January 2019, SSA had issued the representative payees \$190,182 in payments after their deaths. For the three deceased representative payees we identified in this review, SSA has taken corrective action on each. By taking action on these 3 cases, SSA prevented \$30,024 in additional payments after death over the next 12 months.³ The following table provides the details of our case results and estimation. The following table provides the details of our case results and estimation.

Table B–4: Improper Payments to Deceased Representative Payees

Description	Amounts
Deceased Representative Payees Receiving Beneficiary Payments	3
Total Payments Issued After Representative Payees' Deaths	\$190,182
Average Monthly Payment to Deceased Representative Payees	\$834
Average Annual Payment to Deceased Representative Payees	\$10,008
Estimated Payment After Death over Next 12 Months (\$10,008 * 3)	\$30,024

³ We based this estimate on the assumption that conditions will remain the same for the next 12 months.

Appendix C – AGENCY COMMENTS



SOCIAL SECURITY

MEMORANDUM

Date: July 30, 2019 Refer To: S1J-3

To: Gail S. Ennis
Inspector General

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Stephanie Hall".

From: Stephanie Hall
Acting Deputy Chief of Staff

Subject: Office of the Inspector General Draft Report “Match of Florida Death Information Against Social Security Administration Records” (A-08-18-50565) -- INFORMATION

Thank you for the opportunity to review the draft report. Please see our attached comments.

Please let me know if we can be of further assistance. You may direct staff inquiries to Trae Sommer at (410) 965-9102.

**SSA COMMENTS ON THE OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL DRAFT REPORT,
“MATCH OF FLORIDA DEATH INFORMATION AGAINST SOCIAL SECURITY
ADMINISTRATION RECORDS” (A-08-18-50565)**

The receipt of timely and accurate death information greatly reduces the occurrence of improper payments to deceased beneficiaries. The death information we collect aids us in preventing approximately \$50 million in improper payments each month. The Electronic Death Registration (EDR) process provides us with timely and accurate death information, and the current President’s Budget provides funding for expansion of EDR to provide faster, better quality data on deaths. One of EDR’s key features allows States to match a deceased person’s Social Security Number and other identifying information to our records to ensure accuracy before submission.

Once we learn of a beneficiary’s death, we take timely action to post the information to our records and suspend or terminate payments. We reject EDR reports that we cannot verify to prevent any postings of erroneous death information to our records.

We will continue to make incremental changes to increase the completeness of death information in our records and promote program integrity through deterring improper payments. Our responses to the recommendations are below. We also provided technical comments at the staff level.

Recommendation 1

Take action on the 501 deceased beneficiaries we identified.

Response

We agree.

Recommendation 2

Take action on the 17,349 deceased non-beneficiaries we identified to add their deaths to the Numident, as appropriate.

Response

We agree to post death information as resources allow for records that pass our screening process.

MISSION

By conducting independent and objective audits, evaluations, and investigations, the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) inspires public confidence in the integrity and security of the Social Security Administration's (SSA) programs and operations and protects them against fraud, waste, and abuse. We provide timely, useful, and reliable information and advice to Administration officials, Congress, and the public.

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