

Match of Pennsylvania Death Information Against Social Security Administration Records

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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 the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and (2) identify non-beneficiaries in the Commonwealth's death files whose death information did not appear in the Agency'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 records to SSA, and SSA completes an online, real-time verification of the Social Security number. If the numberholder's data match SSA records, SSA posts the State death information to its Numident file and terminates payments to deceased beneficiaries.

We obtained the personally identifiable information of approximately 5 million Social Security numberholders the Pennsylvania Department of Health recorded as deceased between January 1979 and December 2017. We matched the data against SSA payment records and the Numident.

Findings

SSA issued approximately \$19.2 million in payments after death to 369 beneficiaries and 31 representative payees whom the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania recorded as deceased from January 1979 through December 2017. Identifying and correcting these discrepancies will prevent approximately \$5 million in additional improper payments after death over a 12-month period. We also identified 93,560 non-beneficiaries who were deceased according to the Pennsylvania Department of Health but whose death information was not in SSA's Numident.

We did not determine why the deaths were not in SSA's Numident or whether the State reported the deaths to SSA. However, SSA rejects EDR death reports that do not pass its formatting and identification tests to prevent posting erroneous death data to its records. We have a separate, ongoing review that will assess the effectiveness of the EDR process.

The Numident contained death information for 29 of the 31 representative payees; however, SSA had not replaced the representative payees at the time of our data match. As of February 2020, SSA had taken action to replace 26 of the 31 representative payees we identified.

Agency Actions Resulting from the Audit

As of February 2020, SSA had terminated benefits to 320 of the 369 deceased beneficiaries and 26 of 31 representative payees and initiated recovery of \$14 million in improper payments.

Recommendations

1. Take action on the remaining 49 deceased beneficiaries and 5 deceased representative payees we identified.
2. Take action on the 93,560 deceased non-beneficiaries we identified to add their deaths to the Numident, as appropriate.

SSA agreed with the recommendations.