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**OFFICE OF  
THE INSPECTOR GENERAL**

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**SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION**

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**TITLE II BENEFICIARIES WHOSE BENEFITS  
HAVE BEEN SUSPENDED AND WHO HAVE A  
DATE OF DEATH ON THE NUMIDENT**

**April 2011                    A-09-10-10117**

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**AUDIT REPORT**

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## **Mission**

**By conducting independent and objective audits, evaluations and investigations, we inspire public confidence in the integrity and security of SSA's programs and operations and protect them against fraud, waste and abuse. We provide timely, useful and reliable information and advice to Administration officials, Congress and the public.**

## **Authority**

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- Promote economy, effectiveness, and efficiency within the agency.**
- Prevent and detect fraud, waste, and abuse in agency programs and operations.**
- Review and make recommendations regarding existing and proposed legislation and regulations relating to agency programs and operations.**
- Keep the agency head and the Congress fully and currently informed of problems in agency programs and operations.**

**To ensure objectivity, the IG Act empowers the IG with:**

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## SOCIAL SECURITY

### **MEMORANDUM**

Date: April 28, 2011 Refer To:

To: The Commissioner

From: Inspector General

Subject: Title II Beneficiaries Whose Benefits Have Been Suspended and Who Have a Date of Death on the Numident (A-09-10-10117)

### **OBJECTIVE**

Our objective was to determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) had adequate controls to ensure it resolved death information on the Numident for suspended beneficiaries.

### **BACKGROUND**

SSA administers the Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance (OASDI) program under Title II of the *Social Security Act* (Act). This program provides monthly benefits to retired and disabled workers, including their dependents and survivors.<sup>1</sup> Benefits are not payable for the month of a beneficiary's death or later.<sup>2</sup> Upon receipt of a death report, SSA terminates the deceased's benefits and initiates recovery for any payments issued after death.<sup>3</sup>

To identify and prevent erroneous payments to deceased beneficiaries, SSA's Death Alert Control and Update System (DACUS) matches reports of death received from Federal, State, and local agencies against SSA's Master Beneficiary Record (MBR).<sup>4</sup> DACUS also records death information on the Numident, a master file that contains personally identifiable information (PII)<sup>5</sup> for each individual issued a Social Security number (SSN). SSA uses information from the Numident to create a national record of

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<sup>1</sup> Act § 201 et seq., 42 U.S.C. § 401 et seq.

<sup>2</sup> Act § 202(a), 42 U.S.C. § 402(a).

<sup>3</sup> SSA, Program Operations Manual System (POMS), GN 02230.018, GN 02408.005.C, GN 02408.010.

<sup>4</sup> SSA, POMS, GN 02602.060. The MBR is an electronic record of all OASDI beneficiaries.

<sup>5</sup> PII is any information that can be used to distinguish or trace an individual's identity, such as name, SSN, date and place of birth, or mother's maiden name.

death information called the Death Master File (DMF).<sup>6</sup> As a result of a *Freedom of Information Act*<sup>7</sup> lawsuit,<sup>8</sup> SSA makes the DMF available to the public.

SSA may suspend benefits while searching for a representative payee for beneficiaries who are incapable of managing or directing the management of their finances.<sup>9</sup> SSA may also suspend benefits when it needs to verify a beneficiary's address or when a notice sent to the beneficiary returns as undeliverable.<sup>10</sup> Finally, SSA may suspend benefits for miscellaneous reasons.<sup>11</sup>

According to SSA's MBR, as of February 2009, there were approximately 6,500 beneficiaries who were suspended for representative payee development, address, or miscellaneous reasons who had death information on their Numident. As a result, either SSA should have terminated their benefits for death, or if erroneous, removed the death information from their Numident. For our audit, we reviewed a sample of 250 of these suspended beneficiaries to determine whether SSA took appropriate corrective action.

## RESULTS OF REVIEW

SSA needs to improve controls to ensure it takes timely and proper actions to resolve death information on the Numident for suspended beneficiaries. Based on our random sample, we estimate that:

- 4,699 beneficiaries remained in suspended pay status despite the death information on their Numident. We estimate 2,976 of these beneficiaries were improperly paid approximately \$23.8 million.
- The PII for approximately 2,715 beneficiaries was at risk of being released to the public. This included 29 beneficiaries whom SSA subsequently determined were alive and are receiving benefits.
- 157 beneficiaries whose benefits were terminated were improperly paid \$342,114. (See Appendix C.)

Generally, these errors occurred because SSA did not have adequate controls to identify and timely resolve discrepancies between the Numident and MBR.

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<sup>6</sup> SSA, POMS, GN 02602.060.B.1, RM 10235.005.D, RM 10240.010.

<sup>7</sup> 5 U.S.C. § 552.

<sup>8</sup> *Perholtz v. Ross*, Civ. No. 78-2385 and 78-2386 (D.D.C., 1980).

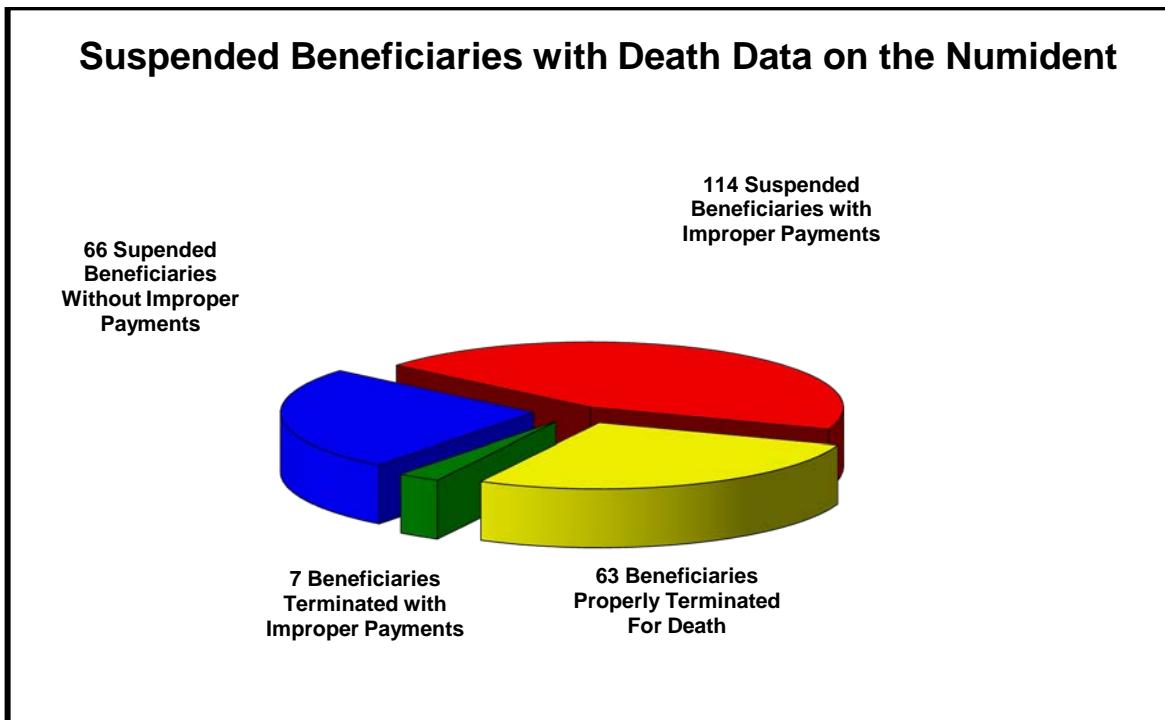
<sup>9</sup> SSA, POMS, GN 00502.001.A, GN 00504.105.A.

<sup>10</sup> SSA, POMS, GN 02605.055.B, SM 03020.080.A.

<sup>11</sup> SSA, POMS, SM 00550.020.B.

## SUSPENDED BENEFICIARIES WITH A DATE OF DEATH ON THE NUMIDENT

Based on a random sample of 250 beneficiaries, we found that 121 (48.4 percent) had improper payments. This consisted of 114 beneficiaries who remained in suspense and 7 beneficiaries whose benefits SSA subsequently terminated for death. In addition, 66 (26.4 percent) suspended beneficiaries were properly paid, and 63 (25.2 percent) were properly terminated for death.



## Procedures for Identifying Payments to Deceased Beneficiaries

The Act requires that SSA compare States' death records with SSA payment records, validate death reports, and correct SSA payment records to reflect the beneficiaries' status.<sup>12</sup> DACUS compares death reports to information on SSA's payment records. If there is conflicting death information, DACUS generates an alert to the local field office (FO) for action. DACUS also generates follow-up alerts every 30 days and monthly reports of death alerts over 120 days for SSA regional offices to review. SSA requires that FOs give prompt attention to death alerts to minimize and prevent improper payments, and take appropriate action to clear alerts within 30 days.<sup>13</sup> Before March 2004, DACUS did not generate an alert when SSA received a death report for a beneficiary who was in suspended pay status in the month of death. However, in March 2004, DACUS began generating alerts for these cases.<sup>14</sup> If SSA determines the

<sup>12</sup> Act § 205 (r), 42 U.S.C. § 405 (r).

<sup>13</sup> SSA, POMS, GN 02602.060.A, GN 02602.065.A and C, SM 00623.003.A.

<sup>14</sup> SSA, POMS, GN 02602.065.A.

beneficiary is alive, SSA employees must clear the death alert and remove the death information from the Numident. If SSA determines the beneficiary is deceased, staff should terminate the benefits.<sup>15</sup> SSA's Death Alert Tracking System allows FO management to monitor and control DACUS alerts.<sup>16</sup>

### **Beneficiaries Remaining in Suspended Pay Status**

Our review disclosed that SSA did not properly resolve the benefit suspensions of 180 (72 percent) of the 250 beneficiaries in our sample. These 180 beneficiaries had been in suspended pay status for an average of 11.2 years<sup>17</sup> since SSA recorded their death information on the Numident. Of these, 114 beneficiaries had improper payments, and 66 did not.

*Suspended Beneficiaries Improperly Paid* - Of the 250 beneficiaries in our sample, 114 (45.6 percent) were improperly paid. This occurred because SSA received death reports for these individuals but did not terminate their benefits. This consisted of

- 89 beneficiaries who were suspended for the month of death or later, and received payments after death totaling \$743,733, and
- 25 beneficiaries who were suspended before the month of death and had withheld benefits, totaling \$166,549, that were payable to their survivors or legal representative of their estate.

Benefits are not payable for the month of a beneficiary's death or later. Upon receipt of a death report, SSA terminates the deceased's benefits and initiates recovery for any payments issued after death.<sup>18</sup> Conversely, when SSA determines it underpaid a deceased beneficiary, staff must determine the proper recipient for the underpayment. SSA pays any underpayments due deceased beneficiaries to the surviving spouse,<sup>19</sup> surviving children, other family members, or legal representative of the estate.

For example, SSA suspended benefits to a spousal beneficiary in July 2008 for address reasons. However, SSA had previously received an Electronic Death Registration (EDR)<sup>20</sup> report with a date of death of October 20, 2007. Although SSA recorded the

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<sup>15</sup> SSA, POMS, GN 02602.060.D.

<sup>16</sup> SSA, POMS, GN 02602.060.E.

<sup>17</sup> The 11.2 years was the mean. The median was 10.8 years.

<sup>18</sup> SSA, POMS, GN 02230.018, GN 02408.005.C, GN 02408.010.

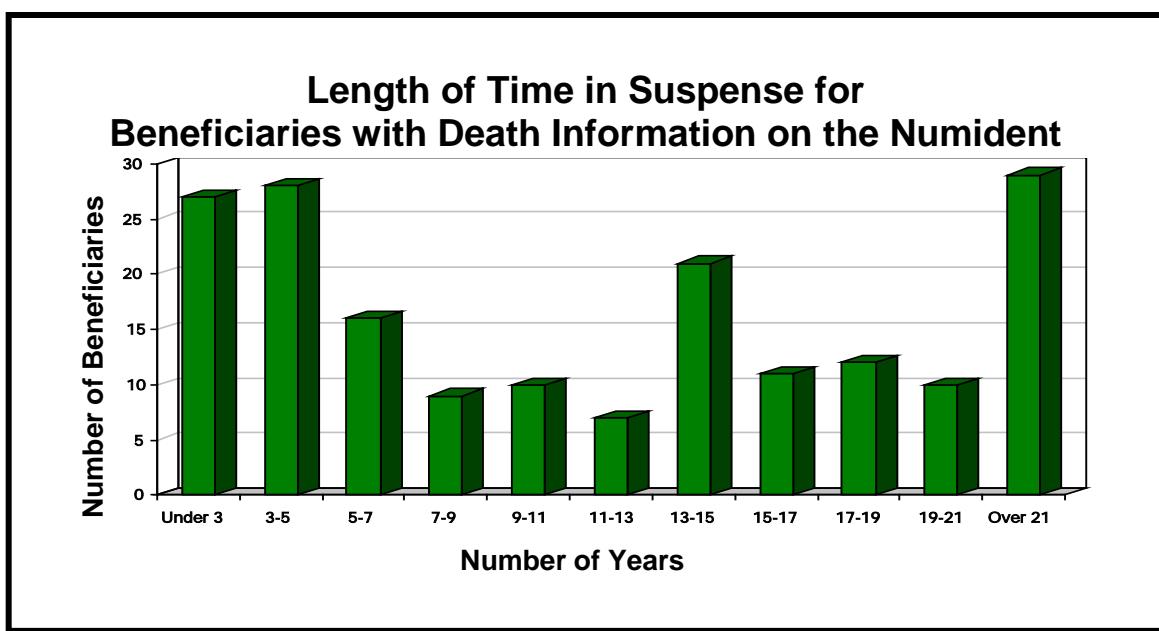
<sup>19</sup> SSA, POMS, GN 02301.030, GN 02301.060, GN 02301.075.

<sup>20</sup> Under EDR, States verify SSNs with SSA at the beginning of the death registration process. This allows SSA to take immediate action to terminate payments upon receipt of a death report without needing to verify the report's accuracy.

death on the Numident, it did not take action to terminate her benefits and initiate recovery for any payments issued after the beneficiary's death. As a result, the beneficiary had improper payments after death of \$10,488.

In an example of an underpayment of benefits, SSA suspended a spouse's benefits in July 2002 for miscellaneous reasons. In May 2006, SSA received a report that the beneficiary died on April 25, 2006. Although the death information was on the beneficiary's Numident, SSA did not take action to terminate her benefits. In addition, SSA did not determine whether the benefits in suspense from July 2002 through March 2006, totaling \$22,563, were payable to a surviving spouse, child, family member, or legal representative of the estate.

*Timeliness in Resolving Death Information for Beneficiaries in Suspense* - Our review disclosed that SSA had not resolved the benefit suspensions for 180 of the 250 sample cases. SSA received death reports for these 180 beneficiaries and recorded the deaths on their Numident records. However, SSA did not use this information to terminate benefits or remove the death information from the Numident if erroneous. As depicted in the chart below, the 180 beneficiaries had been in suspended payment status for up to 22 years after SSA recorded their death information on the Numident. The average length of time the death information was on the Numident was about 11.2 years.<sup>21</sup>



Generally, this occurred because SSA did not have effective controls to identify and resolve Numident death information for beneficiaries in suspense on the MBR. In addition, we found that SSA had recorded the death information for 69 of the beneficiaries on another payment record (that is, the MBR or Supplemental Security Record [SSR]). This consisted of 46 beneficiaries whose deaths were on another MBR,

<sup>21</sup> The 11.2 years was the mean. The median was 10.8 years.

12 beneficiaries whose deaths were on the SSR, and 11 beneficiaries whose deaths were on both the MBR and SSR. While SSA recorded the death information on another payment record, it did not take corrective actions to terminate benefits on the suspended payment record.

### **Improper Disclosure of PII to the Public**

SSA maintains a record of reported deaths on the DMF, which contains detailed PII on deceased individuals. SSA provides DMF data to the Department of Commerce's National Technical Information Service (NTIS). NTIS, in turn, sells DMF data to public and private customers. Customers can purchase the complete data file and subscribe to periodic updates for an additional cost. Rootsweb,<sup>22</sup> Social Security Death Index (SSDI) is one of several Internet sites that make DMF information available to the public.

Of the 180 suspended beneficiaries in our sample, we found 104 had their PII on the SSDI. These beneficiaries' PII was at risk of inappropriate disclosure since SSA did not resolve discrepancies between beneficiaries in suspended payment status and the Numident before it released their death information.

In addition, as of September 2010, SSA had determined that 29 of the 6,527 beneficiaries in our population were alive and receiving benefits. However, SSA did not remove death information from the Numident for seven beneficiaries. In addition, PII for five of the seven beneficiaries was on the SSDI. We recently issued a report that assessed the extent to which SSA releases PII of living individuals erroneously shown as deceased on the DMF.<sup>23</sup>

### **Beneficiaries Whose Benefits Were Terminated for Death**

For 70 of the 250 beneficiaries in our sample, SSA had terminated their benefits. However, SSA did not recover payments after death or resolve withheld benefits before the month of death, totaling \$29,991 for seven beneficiaries.<sup>24</sup> Specifically, SSA did not recover \$7,180 in payments after death from two deceased beneficiaries and did not issue \$22,811 in underpayments to the survivors or the estates of five deceased beneficiaries. This occurred because SSA did not resolve discrepancies between the MBR and Numident in a timely manner; or did not take appropriate actions to identify and issue underpayments to the appropriate individuals. SSA should ensure that staff terminates benefits of deceased beneficiaries timely to prevent such payments from being improperly used. In addition, SSA should ensure staff issues payments withheld from deceased beneficiaries to the beneficiary's survivor or estate.

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<sup>22</sup> <http://ssdi.rootsweb.ancestry.com/>.

<sup>23</sup> SSA OIG, *Follow-up: Personally Identifiable Information Made Available to the Public Via the Death Master File* (A-06-10-20173), March 31, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> One error of \$16,887 was a statistical outlier compared to the other errors; therefore, we excluded it from our projections.

For example, on April 23, 2008, SSA received an EDR report and recorded the beneficiary's death of April 13, 2008 on the Numident. However, SSA did not terminate the benefits until February 9, 2010. As a result, SSA improperly issued payments after death of \$5,155 to the beneficiary's representative payee. SSA subsequently notified the representative payee to refund the overpayment. When the representative payee did not refund the overpayment, SSA attempted to collect it through tax refund offset and administrative wage garnishment. However, as of January 2011, the representative payee had not repaid the overpayment. Had SSA taken timely action to terminate benefits when it received the death report, it could have avoided the cost and difficulty of recovering this overpayment.

In another example, SSA suspended a beneficiary's payments for address development in February 2008 and subsequently received a report that the beneficiary died on May 6, 2009. SSA recorded the death on the Numident and properly terminated the benefits. However, there was no systems alert to ensure appropriate action was taken to determine whether \$16,887 of benefits in suspense for the months before the beneficiary's death were payable to the beneficiary's survivor or estate.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

SSA needs to improve controls to ensure it takes timely and proper actions to resolve death information on the Numident for suspended beneficiaries. In addition, SSA needs to ensure that staff terminates benefits of deceased beneficiaries in a timely manner and identifies and pays underpayments withheld from deceased beneficiaries to the beneficiary's survivor or estate, as appropriate. As a result, we estimate (1) SSA improperly paid 2,976 beneficiaries in suspended pay status approximately \$23.8 million; (2) PII for 2,715 beneficiaries was at risk of improper release to the public; and (3) SSA improperly paid \$342,114 to 157 beneficiaries whose benefits staff terminated for death.

We recommend that SSA:

1. Take appropriate action to terminate benefits or remove erroneous death information from the Numident for the 180 beneficiaries identified by our audit.
2. Identify and take corrective action on the remaining population of 6,277 suspended beneficiaries who had a date of death on the Numident.
3. Take corrective actions for the seven beneficiaries terminated for death with unresolved improper payments.
4. Evaluate the results of its corrective actions for the 7 beneficiaries and determine whether it should review the estimated remaining 150 beneficiaries terminated for death with unresolved improper payments.

5. Improve controls to ensure beneficiaries in suspense with death information on their Numident are properly resolved in a timely manner.

### **AGENCY COMMENTS**

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

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr."

Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr.

# Appendices

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[APPENDIX A](#) – Acronyms

[APPENDIX B](#) – Scope and Methodology

[APPENDIX C](#) – Sampling Methodology and Results

[APPENDIX D](#) – Agency Comments

[APPENDIX E](#) – OIG Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

## **Appendix A**

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### **Acronyms**

Act	<i>Social Security Act</i>
DACUS	Death Alert Control and Update System
D.D.C.	United States District Court for the District of Columbia
DMF	Death Master File
EDR	Electric Death Registration
FO	Field Office
MBR	Master Beneficiary Record
NTIS	National Technical Information Service
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
PHUS	Payment History Update System
PII	Personally Identifiable Information
SSA	Social Security Administration
SSDI	Social Security Death Index
SSN	Social Security Number
SSR	Supplemental Security Record
U.S.C.	United States Code

### **Scope and Methodology**

We obtained a data extract from the Social Security Administration's (SSA) Master Beneficiary Record (MBR) as of February 2009. From this extract, we identified a population of 6,527 beneficiaries whose benefits had been suspended and who had a date of death recorded on the Numident. We selected a random sample of 250 beneficiaries from this population for review.

To accomplish our objective, we

- reviewed the applicable sections of the *Social Security Act*, Federal Regulations, and SSA's Program Operations Manual System;
- interviewed SSA employees from field offices in the San Francisco Region and the Offices of Earnings, Enumeration and Administrative Systems, and Retirement and Survivors Insurance Systems;
- reviewed queries from SSA's MBR, Payment History Update System, Supplemental Security Record, and Numident for each sample item;
- obtained and reviewed electronic folders, including the Paperless System, and Online Retrieval System, when necessary, to determine actions taken by SSA; and
- reviewed the Social Security Death Index for disclosure of personally identifiable information.

We determined the computer-processed data from the MBR and Numident were sufficiently reliable for our intended use. We conducted tests to determine the completeness and accuracy of the data. These tests allowed us to assess the reliability of the data and achieve our audit objectives.

We performed audit work in Richmond, California, between April and November 2010. The entities reviewed 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 objective. We believe the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective.

# Sampling Methodology and Results

From the Social Security Administration's (SSA) Master Beneficiary Record (MBR), we identified 6,527 beneficiaries whose benefits SSA had suspended for representative payee development, address development, or miscellaneous reasons and who had a date of death recorded on their Numident as of February 2009. We randomly selected a sample of 250 beneficiaries and reviewed their MBR and Payment History Update System (PHUS) records to determine the amount of improper payments issued after death to suspended beneficiaries, incorrect payments issued after death, and underpayments due beneficiaries terminated for death.

Of the 250 beneficiaries in our sample, we found that (1) 180 remained in suspended pay status despite the death information on their Numident records; (2) SSA improperly paid 114 beneficiaries \$910,282; (3) 104 had personally identifiable information released to the public; and (4) SSA did not recover or resolve \$29,991 in improper payments after death for 7 deceased beneficiaries.

Projecting these results to our population of 6,527 beneficiaries, we estimate that (1) 4,699 beneficiaries remained in suspended pay despite the death information on their Numident; (2) approximately 2,976 of these beneficiaries were improperly paid about \$23.8 million; (3) personally identifiable information for approximately 2,715 beneficiaries was at risk of improper release to the public; and (4) 157 beneficiaries, whose benefits were terminated, were improperly paid \$342,114.

**Table 1 - Population and Sample Size**

Description	Number of Beneficiaries
Population Size	6,527
Sample Size	250

**Table 2 - Beneficiaries in Suspense**

Description	Number of Beneficiaries
Sample Results	180
Point Estimate	4,699
Projection - Lower Limit	4,376
Projection - Upper Limit	4,997

**Table 3 - Beneficiaries in Suspense with Improper Payments**

Description	Number of Beneficiaries	Amount of Benefits
Sample Results	114	\$910,282
Point Estimate	2,976	\$23,765,658
Projection - Lower Limit	2,636	\$17,280,347
Projection - Upper Limit	3,322	\$30,250,969

**Table 4 - Beneficiaries at Risk of Improper Disclosure of PII**

Description	Number of Beneficiaries
Sample Results	104
Point Estimate	2,715
Projection - Lower Limit	2,381
Projection - Upper Limit	3,059

**Table 5 - Beneficiaries Terminated for Death with Unresolved Improper Payments**

Description	Number of Beneficiaries	Amount of Benefits
Sample Results <sup>1</sup>	6	\$13,104
Point Estimate	157	\$342,114
Projection - Lower Limit	70	\$67,644
Projection - Upper Limit	302	\$616,584

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

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<sup>1</sup> One error of \$16,887 was a statistical outlier compared to the other errors; therefore, we excluded it from our projections.

## ***Appendix D***

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### **Agency Comments**



## SOCIAL SECURITY

### MEMORANDUM

Date: April 15, 2011 Refer To: S1J-3

To: Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr.  
Inspector General

From: Dean S. Landis /s/  
Deputy Chief of Staff

Subject: Office of the Inspector General (OIG) Draft Report, "Title II Beneficiaries Whose Benefits Have Been Suspended and Who Have a Date of Death on the Numident" (A-09-10-10117)--  
INFORMATION

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

Please let me know if we can be of further assistance. Please direct staff inquiries to Chris Molander, at extension 57401.

Attachment:  
SSA Response

**COMMENTS ON THE OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL (OIG) DRAFT REPORT, “TITLE II BENEFICIARIES WHOSE BENEFITS HAVE BEEN SUSPENDED AND WHO HAVE A DATE OF DEATH ON THE NUMIDENT” (A-09-10-10117)**

Thank you for the opportunity to review the subject report. We offer the following responses to your recommendations.

**Recommendation 1**

Take appropriate action to terminate benefits or remove erroneous death information from the Numident for the 180 beneficiaries identified by our audit.

**Response**

We agree.

**Recommendation 2**

Identify and take corrective action on the remaining population of 6,277 suspended beneficiaries who had a date of death on the Numident.

**Response**

We agree.

**Recommendation 3**

Take corrective actions for the seven beneficiaries terminated for death with unresolved improper payments.

**Response**

We agree

**Recommendation 4**

Evaluate the results of its corrective actions for the 7 beneficiaries and determine whether it should review the estimated remaining 150 beneficiaries terminated for death with unresolved improper payments.

**Response**

We agree.

## **Recommendation 5**

Improve controls to ensure beneficiaries in suspense with death information on their Numident are properly resolved in a timely manner.

## **Response**

We agree. Prior to March 2004, our Death Alert Control Update System (DACUS) did not generate alerts for beneficiaries in suspension status. This was the primary reason for unresolved, older cases. We enhanced DACUS, and it now generates those alerts. We are further enhancing some electronic processes for monitoring DACUS alerts, and we expect these enhancements to assist us in improving our accuracy.

## ***Appendix E***

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# OIG Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

### ***OIG Contacts***

James J. Klein, Director, San Francisco Audit Division

Joseph Robleto, Audit Manager

### ***Acknowledgments***

In addition to those named above:

Vickie Choy, Auditor

For additional copies of this report, please visit our Website at  
[www.socialsecurity.gov/oig](http://www.socialsecurity.gov/oig) or contact the Office of the Inspector General's Public Affairs Staff Assistant at (410) 965-4518. Refer to Common Identification Number A-09-10-10117.

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Chairman and Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on Social Security Pensions and Family Policy  
Chairman and Ranking Minority Member, Senate Special Committee on Aging  
Social Security Advisory Board

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OA conducts financial and performance audits of the Social Security Administration's (SSA) programs and operations and makes recommendations to ensure program objectives are achieved effectively and efficiently. Financial audits assess whether SSA's financial statements fairly present SSA's financial position, results of operations, and cash flow. Performance audits review the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of SSA's programs and operations. OA also conducts short-term management reviews and program evaluations on issues of concern to SSA, Congress, and the general public.

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