

# Match of New Mexico 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 New Mexico Department of Health vital records and (2) identify non-beneficiaries who were deceased according to the State file but 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 reports to SSA, and SSA completes an online, real-time verification of the Social Security number. If the numberholders' data match SSA records, SSA posts the State death information to its Numident file and terminates payments to deceased beneficiaries.

We obtained New Mexico Department of Health death data that provided the personally identifiable information of approximately 481,000 Social Security numberholders who died in New Mexico from January 1980 through December 2017. We matched the data against SSA's Numident and payment records.

### Findings

SSA issued approximately \$3.8 million in payments after death to 68 beneficiaries who died in New Mexico between December 1984 and December 2017. Identification and correction of these discrepancies will prevent approximately \$800,000 in additional improper payments after death over the next 12 months. We also identified 4,880 non-beneficiaries who were deceased according to New Mexico Department of Health vital records but whose death information was not in SSA's records. Our data match did not identify any deceased representative payees who were receiving SSA payments.

We did not determine why this death information did not appear in SSA records or whether the deaths were reported to SSA. According to SSA, New Mexico reports about 83 percent of its deaths to SSA via EDR. However, SSA rejects EDR death reports that do not pass its formatting and identification tests to prevent postings of erroneous death information 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.

### Agency Actions Resulting from the Audit

As of August 30, 2019, SSA had terminated benefits to 55 of the 68 deceased beneficiaries and initiated recovery of \$2.8 million in improper payments.

### Recommendations

We recommend SSA:

1. Complete action on the 13 remaining deceased beneficiaries we identified.
2. Add death information for the 4,880 deceased non-beneficiaries identified to the Numident, as appropriate.

SSA agreed with our recommendations.