
OFFICE OF
THE INSPECTOR GENERAL

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION



ECONOMIC RECOVERY PAYMENTS –
CATCH-UP PAYMENTS

January 2011

A-09-10-11099

AUDIT REPORT



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SOCIAL SECURITY

MEMORANDUM

Date: January 10, 2011

Refer To:

To: The Commissioner

From: Inspector General

Subject: Economic Recovery Payments – Catch-Up Payments (A-09-10-11099)

OBJECTIVE

Our objectives were to determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) (1) accurately certified Social Security beneficiaries entitled to receive catch-up economic recovery payments¹ (ERP) under the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009* (ARRA);² and (2) had controls and procedures in place to prevent the issuance of duplicate ERPs to ineligible beneficiaries.

BACKGROUND

ARRA provided for a one-time ERP of \$250 to certain adult Social Security and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) beneficiaries.³ Individuals eligible for benefits for any of the 3 months before the month of enactment (that is, November 2008, December 2008, and January 2009) were eligible to receive the one-time payment. Payments were required to be made only to individuals residing in 1 of the 50 States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, or the Northern Mariana Islands. If individuals received both Social Security and SSI, they were eligible for only one \$250 payment.⁴

In addition, ARRA provided for a one-time payment to Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Railroad Retirement Board (RRB) beneficiaries.⁵ VA and RRB were responsible for certifying the individuals entitled to receive payments under their

¹ Also referred to as stimulus payments or one-time payments.

² Pub. L. No. 111-5, Division B, Title II § 2201(b), H.R. 1-338.

³ We use the term “beneficiary” generically in this report to refer to both Social Security beneficiaries and SSI recipients.

⁴ Pub. L. No. 111-5, Division B, Title II § 2201(a), H.R. 1-337.

⁵ Pub. L. No. 111-5, Division B, Title II § 2201(a)(1), H.R. 1-336 to 1-337.

respective programs and providing the Department of the Treasury (Treasury) with the information needed to disburse such payments.⁶ If individuals received both Social Security or SSI payments and VA or RRB benefits, they were eligible for only one \$250 payment.⁷

SSA was required to identify and certify the Social Security and SSI beneficiaries eligible for an ERP and provide Treasury with the information needed to disburse the payments.⁸ In April 2009, SSA identified all beneficiaries who met the eligibility criteria from its payment records. In May 2009, about 52 million beneficiaries received their \$250 payments, totaling about \$13 billion. From June 2009 through December 2010, SSA performed periodic catch-up runs to identify and certify ERPs to newly eligible and payable individuals.

As part of our review, we identified (1) 620,712 beneficiaries who received about \$155.2 million in catch-up ERPs between June and December 2009; and (2) 1,008 beneficiaries who may have received more than 1 ERP, totaling \$248,227, without any evidence of a returned payment between May 2009 and January 2010.

RESULTS OF REVIEW

SSA properly certified 99.8 percent of the catch-up ERPs to beneficiaries who were eligible to receive payment under ARRA. In addition, we did not identify any beneficiaries who were eligible for an ERP but were not certified to receive payment. However, we estimate that 989 of the 1,008 beneficiaries received improper payments totaling \$247,250 (see Appendix C).⁹ As a result, SSA could improve its controls and procedures to reduce the potential for duplicate payments and double check negotiations (DCN).¹⁰ Specifically, we estimate that

- 449 beneficiaries received 2 ERPs because they did not have a Social Security number (SSN) or had 2 different SSNs, resulting in \$112,250 in improper payments;
- 468 beneficiaries filed for nonreceipt and subsequently negotiated both the original and replacement ERPs, resulting in \$117,000 in improper payments; and
- 72 beneficiaries were concurrently entitled to Social Security and SSI benefits and received 2 ERPs, resulting in \$18,000 in improper payments.

⁶ Pub. L. No. 111-5, Division B, Title II § 2201(b), H.R. 1-338.

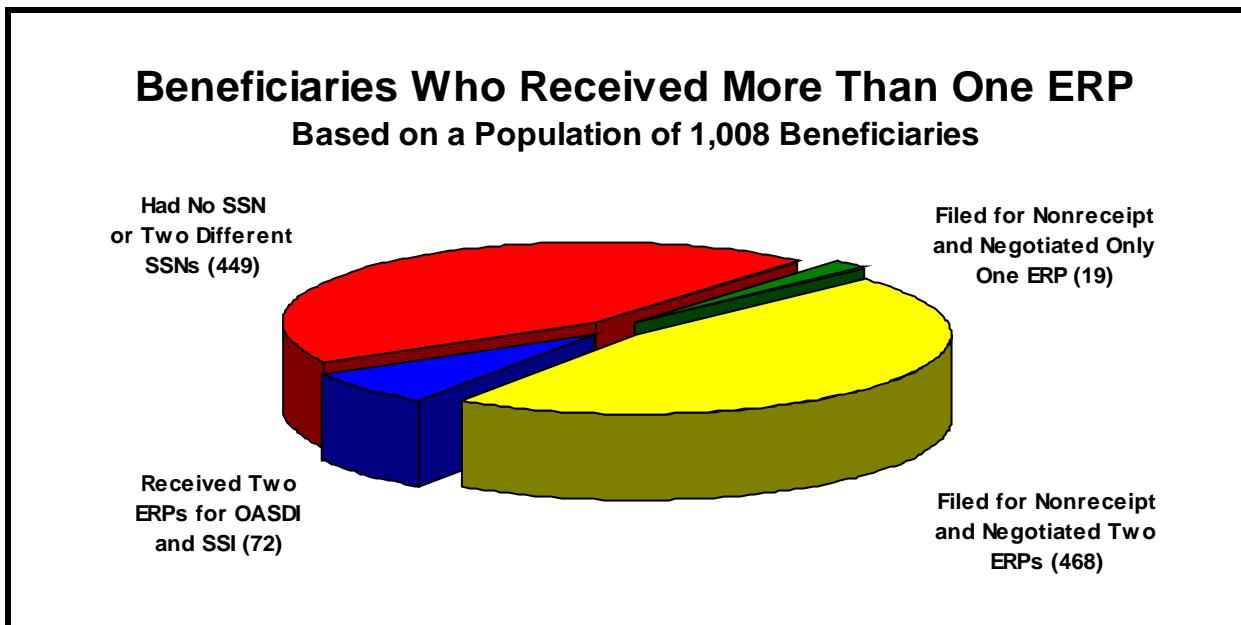
⁷ Pub. L. No. 111-5, Division B, Title II § 2201(a)(3), H.R. 1-337.

⁸ Pub. L. No. 111-5, Division B, Title II § 2201(b), H.R. 1-338.

⁹ The 989 beneficiaries represent about .16 percent of the 620,712 beneficiaries who received a catch-up ERP between June and December 2009.

¹⁰ The cashing of both an original and replacement ERP check is referred to as a DCN.

This occurred, in part, because SSA's automated systems did not always identify whether ERPs had previously been issued to beneficiaries without an SSN or under another SSN or payment record. The results of our review are summarized below.



BENEFICIARIES RECEIVED MORE THAN ONE ECONOMIC RECOVERY PAYMENT

We identified a population of 1,008 beneficiaries who may have received more than 1 ERP totaling \$248,227 between May 2009 and January 2010.¹¹ These beneficiaries did not have any evidence of a returned ERP on their payment record. Of these, 72 beneficiaries received an ERP based on their Social Security entitlement and a second ERP based on their SSI eligibility. We reviewed all 72 of these beneficiaries. For the remaining 936 beneficiaries, we reviewed a random sample of 50 beneficiaries (see Appendix C). Of these, 24 either did not have an SSN or had 2 different SSNs, and 26 claimed nonreceipt of their ERPs.

Newly Eligible and Payable Beneficiaries – Beginning in June 2009, SSA performed catch-up runs to identify beneficiaries who met the eligibility requirements for an ERP but were not paid when the initial payments were disbursed in May 2009. These beneficiaries became eligible for an ERP because of their recent entitlement to Social Security benefits while others were previously excluded from payment because their benefits had been temporarily suspended.

SSA developed the Economic Recovery List Query (ERLQ) to provide information for each beneficiary who was selected to receive an ERP. The ERLQ consists of

¹¹ The ERP is subject to offset, in whole or in part, by Treasury. An ERP offset may be used to collect delinquent debts owed to Federal or State Government agencies. As a result, not all beneficiaries in our population received a \$250 payment.

pre-payment, payment, and post-payment information, including the status of any reclamation actions. However, beneficiaries who are ineligible to receive an ERP will not have any information posted to the ERLQ.¹²

Based on a random sample of 50 beneficiaries, we found 24 had received 2 ERPs because, according to SSA's records, they were incorrectly identified as newly eligible and payable. However, we determined these beneficiaries had already received an ERP. For 20 beneficiaries, SSA had not recorded the beneficiary's SSN on its Master Beneficiary Record (MBR) when the initial ERP was issued in May 2009. For the remaining four beneficiaries, the ERPs were issued under two different SSNs. As a result, these beneficiaries received \$6,000 in duplicate payments. All 24 beneficiaries negotiated both ERPs. During our review, we referred these cases to SSA for corrective action.

In our May 2009 review,¹³ we found that SSA needed to ensure the necessary controls and procedures were in place to reduce the potential for duplicate or improper payments to beneficiaries without SSNs. At the time of our 2009 review, SSA estimated about 13,566 beneficiaries who did not have SSNs may be eligible for ERPs. As such, this increased the risk of duplicate payments.

For example, a Social Security beneficiary had been receiving disability benefits since August 1983. This beneficiary met the eligibility requirements to receive an ERP in May 2009. However, SSA had not recorded the beneficiary's SSN on the MBR. When the ERP was issued, it was recorded under her father's SSN. In June 2009, SSA validated the beneficiary's SSN and updated the MBR. As a result of this update, it appeared the beneficiary had not previously received an ERP. Since SSA did not have controls in place to identify the prior ERP, a second ERP was issued to the beneficiary in July 2009.

Beneficiary Nonreceipt Claims – SSA policy indicates that a report of nonreceipt may be made when an ERP is (1) not received; (2) received but lost, stolen, or destroyed before it was negotiated; or (3) when they cannot remember receiving such payment.¹⁴ SSA processes the nonreceipt claims of the original ERP and Treasury determines the status of the original payment. If the original ERP is outstanding, Treasury will cancel the payment and issue a replacement ERP. Treasury will take no further action unless the original ERP is later negotiated.

Of the 50 beneficiaries in our sample, we found that 26 had claimed nonreceipt of their original ERP and were issued a replacement ERP. We determined 25 of these beneficiaries had subsequently negotiated both the original and replacement ERPs.

¹² SSA, Program Operations Manual System (POMS), GN 02820.010.E.

¹³ SSA, OIG, *Economic Recovery Payments for Social Security and Supplemental Security Income Beneficiaries* (A-09-09-29143), May 2009.

¹⁴ SSA, POMS, GN 02406.120.A.

As a result, these beneficiaries received \$6,250 in duplicate payments. Of these, SSA identified 20 duplicate payments but had not recovered the DCNs from 19 beneficiaries. SSA had not identified the remaining five duplicate payments. During our review, we referred these cases to SSA for corrective action.

For example, an SSI recipient was issued an ERP check on May 18, 2009. On June 25, 2009, the beneficiary filed a report of nonreceipt. Treasury determined the check was still outstanding and issued a replacement check on June 30, 2009. The beneficiary negotiated the replacement check on July 8, 2009. However, on August 28, 2009, the beneficiary also negotiated the original check.

According to SSA, DCNs for ERPs are administrative debts and therefore are not posted to SSA's payment records for collection. SSA established separate procedures to control and collect these debts.

Concurrently Entitled Beneficiaries – Under ARRA, beneficiaries who are concurrently entitled to Social Security and SSI benefits are only permitted to be paid one ERP of \$250.¹⁵ During our review, we identified 72 concurrently entitled beneficiaries who received 2 ERPs—1 for Social Security and 1 for SSI. As a result, these beneficiaries received \$18,000 in duplicate ERPs.

We found that SSA was unaware the 72 beneficiaries had received a duplicate ERP on the other payment record. For 65 beneficiaries, the second ERP was issued because SSA had not recorded the beneficiary's SSN on the MBR for 1 of the ERPs. For four beneficiaries, the ERPs were issued under another SSN for the beneficiary. The remaining three beneficiaries received the first ERP under an incorrect SSN and the second ERP under the correct SSN. Of the 72 beneficiaries, we found that 70 had negotiated both ERPs.

For example, a concurrently entitled beneficiary received Social Security and SSI benefits since May 1973 and August 2006, respectively. This beneficiary met the eligibility requirements to receive an ERP in May 2009. However, SSA had not recorded the beneficiary's SSN on the MBR. As a result, the Social Security ERP was issued under her spouse's SSN on May 7, 2009. In addition, the SSI ERP was issued to the beneficiary on May 18, 2009. Since SSA did not have controls in place to match the payments disbursed to beneficiaries without SSNs, two ERPs were issued to the beneficiary.

¹⁵ Pub. L. No. 111-5, Division B, Title II § 2201(a)(3), H.R. 1-337.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SSA properly certified 99.8 percent of the catch-up ERPs to beneficiaries who were eligible to receive payment under ARRA. In addition, we did not identify any beneficiaries who were eligible for an ERP but were not certified to receive payment. However, we estimate that 989 of the 1,008 beneficiaries received improper payments totaling \$247,250 (see Appendix C). Specifically, we estimate that (1) \$112,250 in improper payments were disbursed to 449 beneficiaries who received 2 ERPs because they did not have an SSN or had 2 different SSNs; (2) \$117,000 in improper payments were disbursed to 468 beneficiaries who had filed for nonreceipt and subsequently negotiated both the original and replacement ERPs; and (3) \$18,000 in improper payments were disbursed to 72 beneficiaries who were concurrently entitled to Social Security and SSI benefits and received 2 ERPs.

Should another ERP be enacted into law, we recommend SSA:

1. Establish additional controls to prevent or detect the issuance of duplicate ERPs to beneficiaries without SSNs.

In addition, we recommend SSA:

2. Take appropriate action to recover the 1,008 duplicate ERPs identified by our audit.

OTHER MATTER

Concurrently Entitled Beneficiaries Who Received Two ERPs Were Overpaid

The SSI program provides payments to financially needy individuals who are aged, blind, or disabled.¹⁶ SSI payments are reduced or offset by a recipient's countable income less certain allowances. Countable income includes both countable earned and unearned income. Social Security benefits are considered as countable unearned income. Monthly unearned income in excess of \$20 results in a dollar-for-dollar reduction in SSI payments.¹⁷

We found that 61 of the 72 concurrently entitled beneficiaries who received 2 ERPs were also overpaid because of discrepancies in their SSNs. Consequently, their Social Security benefits were not counted as unearned income for SSI purposes. Of these, SSA had properly identified 39 beneficiaries with excess SSI payments and established \$136,054 in overpayments. However, we determined that seven of these beneficiaries were overpaid an additional \$4,890 in excess SSI payments. For the remaining 22 beneficiaries, SSA was unaware the beneficiaries had improperly received

¹⁶ The Social Security Act § 1601 *et seq.*, 42 U.S.C. § 1381 *et seq.*

¹⁷ The Social Security Act § 1612, 42 U.S.C. § 1382(a).

\$56,767 in excess SSI payments. As a result, SSA needs to establish \$61,657 in overpayments for the 29 concurrently entitled beneficiaries. During our review, we referred these cases to SSA for corrective action.

For example, a concurrently entitled beneficiary received Social Security and SSI benefits since January 1993 and June 2000, respectively. Because of SSN discrepancies between the MBR and Supplemental Security Record, this beneficiary received two ERPs in May 2009. In addition, since SSA's systems did not detect the beneficiary was concurrently entitled to benefits, it did not consider the \$467 in monthly Social Security benefits when determining the beneficiary's SSI payment amount. As a result, the beneficiary received \$5,598 in excess SSI payments between January 2009 and September 2010.

AGENCY COMMENTS

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



Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr.

Appendices

[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

Acronyms

| | |
|-------------|---|
| ARRA | <i>American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009</i> |
| DCN | Double Check Negotiation |
| ERLQ | Economic Recovery List Query |
| ERP | Economic Recovery Payment |
| MBR | Master Beneficiary Record |
| OIG | Office of the Inspector General |
| PHUS | Payment History Update System |
| POMS | Program Operations Manual System |
| Pub. L. No. | Public Law Number |
| RRB | Railroad Retirement Board |
| SSA | Social Security Administration |
| SSI | Supplemental Security Income |
| SSN | Social Security Number |
| SSR | Supplemental Security Record |
| Treasury | Department of the Treasury |
| VA | Department of Veterans Affairs |

Scope and Methodology

We obtained data extracts from the Social Security Administration's (SSA) Master Beneficiary Record (MBR), Supplemental Security Record (SSR), and Payment History Update System (PHUS) of beneficiaries who received a catch-up economic recovery payment (ERP) between June and December 2009. From the MBR and SSR, we identified a population of 620,712 beneficiaries who received a catch-up ERP. We also identified a population of 936 beneficiaries who may have received and negotiated more than 1 ERP under either the Social Security or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs between May 2009 and January 2010. For each population, we selected a random sample of 50 beneficiaries for detailed review. In addition, we identified 72 beneficiaries who were concurrently entitled to Social Security and SSI benefits and received ERPs under both programs. We reviewed all 72 of these beneficiaries.

To accomplish our objectives, we reviewed

- the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009*;
- applicable Federal laws and regulations, SSA's Program Operations Manual System, and other policy memorandums; and
- queries from SSA's MBR, SSR, PHUS, Numident, Economic Recovery List Query, Online Retrieval System, and the Treasury Check Information System.

We determined the computer-processed data were sufficiently reliable for our intended use. We conducted tests to determine the completeness and accuracy of the data, which allowed us to assess the reliability of the data and achieve our audit objective.

We performed audit work in Richmond, California, between May and June 2010. The entities reviewed were the Offices of the Deputy Commissioner 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 the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Sampling Methodology and Results

Based on a data extract from the Social Security Administration's (SSA) Master Beneficiary Record (MBR), Supplemental Security Record (SSR), and Payment History Update System (PHUS), we identified a population of 620,712 beneficiaries who received a catch-up economic recovery payment (ERP) of \$250 between June and December 2009. SSA issued about \$155.2 million in ERPs to these beneficiaries. From this population, we selected a random sample of 50 beneficiaries to determine whether they were entitled to an ERP. Our review disclosed that SSA properly issued catch-up ERPs to all 50 beneficiaries. In addition, we expanded our work to perform a review of beneficiaries who received more than one ERP.

We obtained a data extract from the MBR, SSR, and PHUS to identify all beneficiaries who received more than one ERP between May 2009 and January 2010. From this extract, we identified a population of 1,008 beneficiaries with more than 1 ERP totaling \$248,227.¹ These beneficiaries had no evidence of a returned ERP on their payment record. Of these, we found 72 beneficiaries were concurrently entitled to Social Security and Supplemental Security Income benefits and received 2 ERPs, resulting in \$18,000 in improper payments.

For the remaining 936 beneficiaries, we selected a random sample of 50 beneficiaries for review. We found 24 beneficiaries received 2 ERPs because these individuals did not have a Social Security number (SSN) or had 2 different SSNs, resulting in \$6,000 in improper payments. Therefore, we estimate about \$112,250 in ERPs were improperly issued to 449 beneficiaries between May 2009 and January 2010.

We also found 26 beneficiaries had filed for nonreceipt of their original ERP and were issued a replacement ERP. Of these, 25 beneficiaries subsequently negotiated both the original and replacement ERPs, resulting in \$6,250 in improper payments. Therefore, we estimate about \$117,000 in ERPs were improperly issued to 468 beneficiaries who claimed nonreceipt and subsequently negotiated both the original and replacement ERPs. In total, we estimate that 989 beneficiaries received improper payments totaling \$247,250. The following tables provide the details of our sample results and statistical projections.

¹ The ERP is subject to offset, in whole or in part, by the Department of the Treasury. An ERP offset may be used to collect delinquent debts owed to Federal or State Government agencies. As a result, not all beneficiaries in our population received their \$250 payment.

Table 1 – Population and Sample Size

| Description | Number of Beneficiaries | Amount of Payments |
|-----------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Population Size | 936 | \$230,227 |
| Sample Size | 50 | \$12,351 |

Table 2 – Beneficiaries Who Received and Negotiated More Than One ERP

| Description | Number of Beneficiaries | Improper Payments |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Sample Results | 24 | \$6,000 |
| Point Estimate | 449 | \$112,250 |
| Projection - Lower Limit | 338 | |
| Projection - Upper Limit | 563 | |

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

Table 3 – Beneficiaries Who Filed for Nonreceipt and Negotiated Two ERPs

| Description | Number of Beneficiaries | Improper Payments ² |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Sample Results | 25 | \$6,250 |
| Point Estimate | 468 | \$117,000 |
| Projection - Lower Limit | 355 | |
| Projection - Upper Limit | 581 | |

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

² SSA identified 20 of the 25 beneficiaries (80 percent) prior to our audit. These beneficiaries received \$5,000 in improper payments. The remaining 5 beneficiaries (20 percent), who received \$1,250 in improper payments, were not identified by SSA. Assuming our sample results are representative of the population, we estimate that 94 beneficiaries received \$23,500 in improper payments that were not identified by SSA.

Appendix D

Agency Comments



SOCIAL SECURITY

MEMORANDUM

Date: January 3, 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 Draft Report, "Economic Recovery Payments - Catch-Up Payments" (A-09-10-11099)—INFORMATION

Thank you for the opportunity to review the draft report. Attached is our response to the report.

Please let me know if we can be of further assistance. You may direct staff inquiries to Rebecca Tothero, Acting Director, Audit Management and Liaison Staff at (410) 966-6975.

Attachment:
SSA Response

**COMMENTS ON THE OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL DRAFT REPORT,
“ECONOMIC RECOVERY PAYMENTS (ERP) - CATCH-UP PAYMENTS”
(A-09-10-11099)**

We offer the following responses to your recommendations:

Recommendation 1

Should another ERP be enacted into law, we recommend SSA establish additional controls to prevent or detect the issuance of duplicate ERPs to beneficiaries without SSNs.

Response

We agree. As you acknowledge on page 2, “SSA certified and properly issued 99.8 percent of the catch-up ERPs to eligible beneficiaries under ARRA.” In your May 2010 audit report, “Economic Recovery Payments for Social Security and Supplemental Security Income Beneficiaries” (A-09-10-11017), you determined we attained the same 99.8 percent accuracy rate for the 52 million ERPs we issued in May 2009. Nevertheless, if Congress enacts another ERP we will consider additional controls to prevent the type of overpayments disclosed in your report.

Recommendation 2

Take appropriate action to recover the 1,008 duplicate ERPs identified by our audit.

Response

We agree. Thank you for providing the names and Social Security numbers for the 1,008 cases. We have already identified a subset of those cases where beneficiaries claimed non-receipt and subsequently negotiated both original and replacement ERPs, and we are working to collect the overpayments. We will use the information you provided to identify the remaining cases and take actions to collect those overpayments.

Page 7, under “Other Matters”

You identified 29 cases where beneficiaries concurrently entitled to Social Security and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits may have received excess SSI payments. You state, “SSA needs to establish \$61,657 in overpayments for the 29 concurrently entitled beneficiaries.”

Response

We are reviewing those 29 cases and will establish overpayments where appropriate.

Appendix E

OIG Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

OIG Contacts

James J. Klein, Director, San Francisco Audit Division

Jack H. Trudel, Audit Manager

Acknowledgments

In addition to those named above:

Wilfred Wong, Senior Auditor

Joe Cross, IT Specialist

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