



Office *of the* Inspector General

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Congressional Response Report

The Social Security Administration's
Field Office Benefit Verification
Process

A-04-14-24136 December 2014

OIG Office of the Inspector General
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

December 1, 2014

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on
Social Security
Committee on Ways and Means
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Becerra:

In a May 1, 2014 letter, you asked my office to review the Social Security Administration's (SSA) efforts to reduce the number of benefit verification requests made by individuals at field offices and/or reduce the impact that responding to these requests has had on field office workloads. You were interested in specific strategies that SSA's national, regional, and local field offices had pursued to reduce these requests, including any effect of such strategies and how SSA used its data exchanges to provide this information directly to agencies/States. You were also interested in the number of benefit verification requests by office and region as well as over time.

My office is committed to conducting reviews that identify areas in which SSA can improve the effectiveness and efficiency of its programs and operations. Thank you for bringing your concerns to my attention. Our report highlights various facts pertaining to the issues raised in your letter. To ensure SSA is aware of the information provided to your office, we are forwarding a copy of this report to the Agency.

If you have any questions concerning this matter, please call me or have your staff contact Kristin Klima, Congressional and Intragovernmental Liaison at (202) 358-6319.

Sincerely,



Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr.
Inspector General

Enclosure

cc:
Carolyn W. Colvin

The Social Security Administration's Field Office Benefit Verification Process

A-04-14-24136



December 2014

Office of Audit Report Summary

Objectives

To determine (1) specific strategies the Social Security Administration's (SSA) national, regional, and local field offices (FO) had pursued to reduce the number of benefit verification (BEVE) letters individuals requested at FOs, including any effect of such strategies; (2) how SSA used its data exchanges to provide this information directly to agencies/States; and (3) the number of BEVE requests by office and region as well as over time.

Background

In a May 1, 2014 letter, the Ranking Member of the House Subcommittee on Social Security, Committee on Ways and Means, asked us to evaluate SSA's past efforts to reduce the number of BEVE requests made by individuals at FOs and/or reduce the impact that responding to these requests has had on FO workloads.

SSA's BEVE letter is proof that an individual receives Social Security benefits, Supplemental Security Income, or Medicare. Individuals may obtain these letters via SSA's FO, national 800-number, or Website. SSA's data exchanges provide governments, businesses, and private organizations access to information they need to provide services to their and SSA's mutual customers.

Our Findings

SSA's primary strategy to reduce the number of FO-issued BEVEs was its national outreach program. Over the last 15 years, SSA has developed and enhanced other service-delivery channels to reduce the number of calls or visits to local FOs. As part of SSA's national outreach, FOs, with regional coordination, promoted and encouraged the public to use the Agency's optional service channels to conduct SSA business, including requesting BEVE letters. In December 2013, when SSA decided to discontinue FO-issued BEVE letters, SSA began notifying the public about the planned service change. However, in July 2014, SSA reversed its decision to discontinue the service.

SSA did not use type-of-claimant and age data to direct its BEVE outreach. Instead, SSA used employee and visitor anecdotal information to identify those organizations that sent individuals to FOs for BEVE letters. SSA told us it did not have specific data that showed a direct relationship between its outreach efforts and a change in the number of BEVE requests among its various service channels. SSA further stated it had not conducted a pilot study to determine the impact of the planned discontinuance of the BEVE service at FOs. However, SSA told us it had experienced the effect of limiting this service during the Government shutdown in 2013 and did not identify any major issues. SSA expected, in the long-term, the service change would have allowed it to annually redirect approximately 90 work years of staff time and resources to its core mission work.

All States have electronic access to BEVE data through SSA's data exchanges. SSA acknowledges that technical and cost limitations prevent some States from fully using the exchanges. SSA believes its continued outreach efforts and special workload studies will identify partners that could make better use of its data exchanges and may ultimately reduce FO workloads.

Since Fiscal Year 2011, over 40 million individuals have visited SSA FOs each year. Approximately 5 million (12.5 percent) of these visitors requested a BEVE letter. Since SSA expanded its online service in 2013, individuals have steadily increased their use of this service to request BEVEs. To date, more individuals have chosen to obtain a BEVE letter at an FO.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BENDEX	Beneficiary and Earnings Data Exchange
BEVE	Benefit Verification
FO	Field Office
FY	Fiscal Year
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
SDX	State Data Exchange
SHPC	Self-Help Personal Computer
SOLQ/SOLQ-I	State Online Query–Internet
SSA	Social Security Administration
SSI	Supplemental Security Income
SVES	State Verification and Exchange System

OBJECTIVES

Our objectives were to determine (1) specific strategies the Social Security Administration's (SSA) national, regional, and local field offices (FO) had pursued to reduce the number of benefit verification (BEVE) letters individuals requested at FOs, including any effect of such strategies; (2) how SSA used its data exchanges to provide this information directly to agencies/States; and (3) the number of BEVE requests by office and region as well as over time.

BACKGROUND

In a May 1, 2014 letter,¹ the Ranking Member of the House Subcommittee on Social Security, Committee on Ways and Means, asked us to evaluate SSA's efforts to reduce the number of BEVE requests made by individuals at FOs and/or reduce the impact that responding to these requests has had on FO workloads. The Ranking Member was interested in knowing the specific strategies SSA used to reduce these requests, including any effect of such strategies; how SSA used its data exchanges to provide this information directly to agencies/States; and the number of BEVE requests by office and region as well as over time. The Ranking Member was concerned about SSA's decision to stop issuing these letters² at its FOs.

In December 2013, SSA decided to discontinue FO issuance of BEVE letters, effective October 1, 2014. However, in July 2014, SSA reversed its decision to discontinue the service. SSA notified its regional executives that it “. . . will revisit implementation of this change periodically as we assess the impact of our outreach efforts.”

SSA provides benefits to eligible individuals through its Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs under Titles II and XVI of the *Social Security Act*.³ If an individual needs proof that he/she is receiving Social Security benefits, SSI, or Medicare,⁴ the beneficiary may request a BEVE letter from SSA.

An individual may use SSA's BEVE letter as proof of

- income to apply for a loan mortgage,
- income for assisted housing or other state or local benefits,
- current Medicare health insurance coverage,
- retirement status,

¹ See Appendix A for a copy of the Ranking Member's May 1, 2014 letter.

² See Appendix E, page E-2, for an example of an SSA BEVE letter.

³ The Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance program covers workers and their dependents or survivors, while the SSI program covers financially-needy individuals. See *Social Security Act* §§ 201 *et seq.* and 1601 *et seq.*; 42 U.S.C. §§ 401 *et seq.* and 1381 *et seq.*

⁴ In some situations, an individual may request a BEVE letter to prove he/she is not receiving benefits from SSA.

- disability, and
- age.

Individuals may request a BEVE letter through one of three SSA service channels.

1. **Visit an FO.** SSA's network of 1,245 FOs is the Agency's primary point of face-to-face contact with the public. FOs are responsible for various workloads, including processing disability, retirement, and survivors claims; issuing new and replacement Social Security cards; updating beneficiaries' records for post-entitlement actions; and issuing BEVE letters.
2. **Call the national 800 number.** SSA's 27 teleservice centers operate this service. Callers may speak with an SSA service representative or use automated service applications.
3. **Access SSA's Website.** The Agency's Website enables individuals to create their own *my Social Security* account. With this account, individuals can instantly access their BEVE information, payment history, earnings record, and other information.

SSA provides for its information to be electronically shared with States, Federal agencies,⁵ and other partners⁶ through data exchanges. SSA provides States electronic data for use in determining entitlement and eligibility for federally funded benefit programs. SSA's Office of Data Exchange in the Office of Data Exchange and Policy Publications is responsible for ensuring the exchanges support the Agency's program and business needs. To receive data through SSA's data exchanges, the user must sign computer-matching and information exchange agreements. Private entities do not have access to BEVE data through SSA's data exchanges.

To accomplish our objectives, we interviewed SSA officials and reviewed pertinent policies and procedures. Because States use SSA BEVE data to determine entitlement and eligibility for federally funded benefit programs, our review on how SSA used its data exchanges to provide this information directly to agencies/States focused primarily on States' use of the exchanges. We obtained SSA's Fiscal Year (FY) 2011 through 2013 statistics on four of its data exchanges. We also obtained and reviewed SSA's FO visitor and BEVE production data for FYs 2011 through 2014. Finally, we contacted representatives in five States to discuss their use of, including any issues with, SSA's data exchanges to obtain beneficiary BEVEs. For more information on our scope and methodology, see Appendix B.

⁵ SSA shares information with 24 Federal agencies through its data exchanges.

⁶ Other SSA data exchange partners include prisons, foreign governments, and private entities.

RESULTS OF REVIEW

Primarily, SSA's strategy for reducing the number of FO-issued BEVEs has been its national outreach program. Over the last 15 years, SSA has developed and enhanced other service delivery channels to reduce the number of calls or visits to local FOs. As part of SSA's national outreach, FOs, with regional coordination, promoted and encouraged the public to use the Agency's optional service channels to conduct SSA business, including requesting BEVE letters. In December 2013, when SSA decided to discontinue FO-issued BEVE letters, FOs began notifying the public about the planned service change.

SSA did not use type-of-claimant and age data to direct its BEVE outreach. Instead, SSA used employee and visitor anecdotal information to identify those organizations that sent individuals to FOs for BEVE letters. SSA told us it did not have specific data that showed a direct relationship between its outreach efforts and a change in the number of BEVE requests among its various service channels. However, SSA provided data that showed online BEVE requests had increased while requests at FOs and via the national 800-number had declined. SSA further stated it had not conducted a pilot study to determine the impact of the planned discontinuance of the FO BEVE service. However, SSA told us it had experienced the effect of limiting this service during the Government shutdown in 2013 and did not identify any major issues. SSA expected, in the long-term, the service change would have allowed it to annually redirect approximately 90 work years of staff time and resources to its core mission work.

In addition, all States have access to some form of SSA data electronically for BEVEs. SSA acknowledges that technical and cost limitations prevent some States from fully using the exchanges. SSA believes its continued outreach efforts and special workload studies will identify partners that could make better use of its data exchanges and may ultimately reduce FO workloads.

Since FY 2011, over 40 million individuals have visited SSA FOs each year. Approximately 5 million (12.5 percent) of these visitors requested a BEVE letter. Since SSA expanded its online service in 2013, individuals have steadily increased their use of this service to request BEVE information. To date, more individuals have chosen to obtain a BEVE letter at an FO.

SSA's Past Efforts to Reduce FOs' BEVE Workload

SSA's specific strategy at the national, regional, and local levels to reduce the number of FO-issued BEVEs was its national outreach program. Over the last 15 years, SSA has developed alternatives to face-to-face service in its FOs. FOs, with regional coordination, participated in SSA's national outreach program by promoting and encouraging Social Security beneficiaries and SSI recipients to use the Agency's optional service channels. The marketing efforts for SSA's optional service channels included television and radio public service announcements,

print advertisements, Webpage postings and promotions, display banners, press releases, billboards, airport signs, and social media.⁷

SSA's first optional service channel for "proof of income" or BEVE letters was via the Internet in 1999 and, in 2004, SSA offered the BEVE through its national 800-number.⁸ In 2007, SSA initiated the Self-Help Personal Computer (SHPC) pilot to increase baby boomers' use of its online services and improve service for walk-in FO traffic. This pilot offered visitors at select FOs the option of using computers, instead of face-to-face contact, to conduct their business. One FO transaction offered was the BEVE letter request.⁹

In 2012, SSA expanded its online services to reduce FO traffic and call volumes to its national 800-number through its creation of the *my Social Security* portal. The *my Social Security* portal allowed registered users to access their SSA-related information and update certain information and records with the Agency online. SSA added the BEVE service to the *my Social Security* portal in January 2013. This expansion allowed individuals to obtain a BEVE letter instantly. SSA announced its objective was to ". . . provide faster service to more people in more places."¹⁰ Table 1 provides a timeline of SSA's optional services that the public might use to obtain a BEVE letter.

Table 1: Timeline of SSA Service Delivery Options for Individuals' BEVEs

Timeline	Service Channel	Method of Request and Receipt for SSA BEVE
1999	Internet	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Any location with Internet access.SSA would mail the BEVE letter.
2004	National 800-number	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Call and use automated process or speak directly with SSA employee.SSA would mail the BEVE letter.
2007	SHPCs in Select FOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Limited FOs where individual used SHPC or requested SSA assistance in using the computer.Individual could print BEVE letters onsite.
2013	<i>my Social Security</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Individual must register, and then may query, save, and print the BEVE letter from any location that has Internet access and a printer.

⁷ Social media includes YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. SSA OIG, *Evaluation Report: The Social Security Administration's Electronic Services* (A-14-11-11112), October 2011.

⁸ SSA OIG, *Quick Response Evaluation: The Social Security Administration's Electronic Government Services* (A-14-08-28113), August 2008.

⁹ SSA OIG, *Quick Response Evaluation: Self-help Personal Computer Pilot* (A-14-10-11001), September 2009.

¹⁰ SSA Press Release, *Social Security Announces New Online Services Available with a my Social Security Account*, January 7, 2013.

In December 2013, to meet the increasing demands for its core services, SSA announced it was phasing out its FO service for BEVEs.¹¹ Instead, individuals would obtain these letters through SSA's *my Social Security* or national 800-number service channels. SSA has since decided to delay this change in its FO service and plans to revisit implementation of this change periodically as it assesses its outreach efforts.¹²

SSA's Actions to Notify the Public of the Planned Service Change

SSA had notified the public that it planned to stop issuing BEVE letters in the FOs beginning October 1, 2014. Since February 2014, through its FO outreach efforts, SSA has contacted over 125,000 advocates; community groups; tribal entities; Federal, State, and local agencies; and other organizations to advise them of the upcoming service change. SSA created marketing materials to use during the outreach efforts. SSA made most of its outreach through a "Dear Colleague" letter, which FOs mailed to Agency partners. Additionally, SSA created marketing materials that FOs provided to individuals who visited their office and displayed official publications in their offices. Some of SSA's outreach material is listed below.

- SSA Publication No. 05-10544, *Important Information: Changes in Certain Services*, February 2014. See Appendix C for an example of this publication.
- SSA Publication No. 05-10559, *Information for Agencies and Other Organizations—How to Get Proof Of Social Security Numbers or Benefits*, February 2014. See Appendix D for an example of this publication.
- SSA Publication No. 05-10552, *Information for Advocates, Social Service Agencies, and Other Third Parties—The Fastest Way to Verify Social Security and Supplemental Security Income Benefits*, March 2014. See Appendix E for an example of this publication.
- SSA *Dear Colleague* letter. See Appendix F for an example of this publication.

In addition, SSA's planned transition to the service change included procedures for FO staff following the October 1 deadline. SSA instructed FOs to continue their outreach by making visitors aware of the service change and inform them of the two options available for obtaining BEVE letters. SSA FOs were also to continue educating the public on the features of a *my Social Security* account, while encouraging customers to register for an account.

¹¹ Social Security Update, *Some Delivery of Services to Change as Technology Offers More Efficient Means*, December 2013. In this update, SSA also announced it was phasing out the Social Security number printout. Individuals request the printout as proof of their Social Security number.

¹² The effective date for the discontinued FO service was set for October 1, 2014. However, on July 16, 2014, SSA reversed its decision.

Impact of SSA's Planned Service Change on FO Workloads

SSA estimated that, in Year 1 of the FO service change, it would recognize only marginal benefits in its workloads because FO staff would continue educating the public about the change. However, SSA expected long-term benefits. SSA estimated the service change would have allowed the Agency to redirect approximately 90 work years to process its core mission work.

SSA also expected that discontinuing FO-issued BEVE letters would have enabled FO staff to focus its time on work that requires face-to-face service. For example, staff would serve more individuals who are filing a new claim or need help on an existing claim. In addition, FO staff would have more time to finalize claims and process various backlogged workloads. The additional time would help minimize backlogs in such workloads as resolving improper payments and preparing work reports.

SSA estimated the service change would not have significantly increased workloads at its teleservice centers, which process SSA's national 800-number inquiries. Although SSA expected the service change would increase the number of calls to its customer service number from individuals seeking BEVEs, SSA believed its automated telephone service would process most of these calls. SSA acknowledged that not all callers would use the automated service and would need to speak with a service representative. As a result, teleservice centers would experience an increase in their workloads for mailing the letters. However, SSA estimated the overall increase to the teleservice center costs would be nominal.

Impact of SSA's Planned Service Change on FO Visitors

SSA did not conduct a pilot study to determine the impact of its planned service change for those customers who would visit an FO to obtain a BEVE letter as of the October 1 effective date. However, SSA told us it experienced the effect of limiting this service during the Government shutdown in 2013. According to SSA, FOs remained open but did not issue BEVE letters. SSA told us it had not identified any major problems from temporarily discontinuing this service.

Because some individuals lack access to a computer or the Internet, SSA planned for its FOs to provide continuing outreach and education beyond the service change deadline to assist those customers who are obtaining BEVE letters. SSA also stated that to better serve customers who did not have access to a computer or the Internet, it planned to continue its SHPC pilot. As of June 2014, SSA had 649 SHPCs in 269 FOs.¹³

Finally, SSA understood that, after the October 1 effective date, situations would occur where it would be essential for individuals to obtain a BEVE letter from an FO. As such, SSA issued instructions that authorized FO management to issue visitors a BEVE letter in emergency or hardship situations.

¹³ Data obtained from SSA's Office of Operations.

Efforts to Promote States' Use of SSA Data Exchanges

SSA provides States electronic data to determine entitlement and eligibility for federally funded benefit programs, such as Medicare and Medicaid; subsidized housing; Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; and Temporary Assistance to the Needy.¹⁴ SSA has a dedicated Website, www.socialsecurity.gov/dataexchange, for its partners and others to learn about these data exchanges. The Website includes links to various user and support manuals as well as instruction on how to apply for an SSA data exchange.

All States have access to some form of SSA data electronically to verify customers' benefits. SSA acknowledges that technical and cost limitations prevent some States from fully using the exchanges. For example, a State's systems' infrastructure and costs of technical resources may limit its use of the data exchanges. A State's costs to use SSA's data exchange depend on the data systems needed to support the data exchange and SSA's volume usage charges.

According to SSA, it does not know how each State's system infrastructure, technical resources, or information technology funding limits a State's use of these exchanges. Further, although SSA knows the volume and type of data a State obtains via the data exchanges, the Agency does not know how often States use the data to verify benefits. SSA is aware of the importance of this information, but obtaining these data from States and other users is a challenge the Agency continues addressing. For example, SSA conducts occasional special studies to assess how business partners' need for SSA's data impacts its FO services. Such information allows the Agency to identify and inform partners how to better use SSA data exchanges.

SSA has four data exchanges that States may use to verify benefit information, as follows.

- Beneficiary and Earnings Data Exchange (BENDEX). This service provides Title II BEVE and earnings data.
- State Data Exchange (SDX). This service provides Title XVI BEVE data.
- State Verification and Exchange System (SVES). This service provides SSN verification and Title II and XVI BEVE data.
- State Online Query–Internet (SOLQ/SOLQ-I). This service provides SSN Verification and Title II and XVI BEVE data.

See Appendix G for States' FY 2013 use of the BENDEX, SDX, and SVES data exchanges and SOLQ and SOLQ-I data exchanges.

We contacted representatives in five States regarding their use of SSA exchanges to obtain benefit verification information. Each State's representative told us that they generally do not have any problems accessing SSA's data exchanges. One representative told us they sometimes encounter issues obtaining data for beneficiaries who receive benefits from another person's

¹⁴ SSA does not offer electronic data exchanges to private entities for BEVE data.

account—such as a parent or spouse. Representatives also stated that they contact and receive assistance from SSA when issues occur. Finally, the States’ representatives indicated that current costs to use these exchanges are not prohibitive. However, one State told us that because of priorities with its information technology resources, it had not yet developed a system so it might use SOLQ-I to receive real time data.

SSA did not use type-of-claimant and age data to direct its BEVE outreach. Instead, SSA used employee and visitor anecdotal information to identify those organizations that sent individuals to FOs for BEVE letters. SSA believes its continued outreach and education efforts, along with its special FO workload studies, will result in more information on how its partners could better use its data exchanges. SSA explained this information will enable it to take actions that may ultimately reduce the number of individuals who visit FOs to obtain a BEVE letter.

BEVE Workload Statistics

Since FY 2011, approximately 40 million individuals have visited SSA FOs each year. Of these visitors, approximately 5 million (12.5 percent) requested a BEVE letter. Table 2 details the number of FO visitors to those who requested a BEVE letter during FYs 2011 through 2014.

**Table 2: FO Workload: Comparison of BEVE Letters Issued to Visitors
(FYs 2011 Through 2014)**

FY	Number of FO Visitors (in millions) ¹⁵	Number of FO-Issued BEVEs (in millions) ¹⁶	Percentage of BEVEs to Visitors
2011	44.9	5.5	12.3
2012	44.9	5.6	12.5
2013	43.2	5.6	12.8
2014	40.8	4.9	12.1
Totals	173.8	21.6	12.5%

¹⁵ Data obtained from SSA’s MI Central online database.

¹⁶ Data obtained from SSA’s Office of Operations.

Table 3 shows the number and percentage of BEVE requests by SSA’s three service channels for FYs 2011 through 2014. As previously mentioned, FO visitors requested about 5 million BEVE letters each year. However, BEVE requests via SSA’s national 800-number decreased in volume each year. Furthermore, since SSA expanded its *my Social Security* in 2013, individuals have steadily increased their use of this service to request BEVEs—from 28 percent to 44 percent within 2 FYs. Yet, to date, more individuals have chosen to visit an FO to obtain BEVE letters.

**Table 3: SSA’s BEVE Workload by Service Channel
(FYs 2011 Through 2014)¹⁷**

SSA Service Channel	FY 2011		FY 2012		FY 2013		FY 2014	
	BEVEs (million)	%	BEVEs (million)	%	BEVEs (million)	%	BEVEs (million)	%
FOs	5.5	72.4	5.6	74.7	5.5	56.7	4.9	45.0
National 800-Number	2.1	27.6	1.9	25.3	1.5	15.5	1.2	11.0
<i>my Social Security</i>	---	---	---	---	2.7	27.8	4.8	44.0
Totals	7.6	100.0%	7.5	100.0%	9.7	100.0%	10.9	100.0%

SSA told us it did not have any specific data that showed a direct relationship between its outreach efforts and a change in the number of BEVE requests among its various service channels. However, SSA provided data that showed online BEVE requests have increased while requests at FOs and via the national 800-number have declined. Our review of SSA’s BEVE workload for FYs 2011 through 2014 did not identify any significant changes at a particular FO that SSA attributed directly to an initiative to reduce this workload. We did identify some significant variances in workload at several FOs, but FO managers attributed the changes to FO relocation or closure of a nearby FO.

Since FY 2011, each region has generally processed about the same share of SSA’s FO BEVE workload. The Atlanta Region generally processed the largest share (20 percent). In contrast, the Denver Region had the smallest share (1.5 percent). Table 4 details total FO-issued BEVE letters, including the overall percentage, by highest to lowest volume region for FYs 2011 through 2014.

¹⁷ Data obtained from SSA’s Office of Operations.

Table 4: FO-Issued BEVE Letters by Region for FYs 2011 Through 2014¹⁸

FO-Issued BEVE Letters by Region					
Region	FY 2011	FY 2012	FY 2013	FY 2014	Percent (4-Year Average)
Atlanta	1,086,138	1,111,045	1,064,248	1,000,038	19.7
Chicago	1,000,185	1,008,307	959,281	844,493	17.6
New York	801,082	842,914	817,408	736,201	14.8
San Francisco	758,475	784,935	834,365	738,693	14.4
Dallas	645,233	620,328	627,748	534,315	11.2
Philadelphia	446,081	437,609	439,005	399,009	8.0
Boston	357,882	361,767	348,748	295,561	6.3
Kansas City	211,253	228,254	229,413	199,655	4.0
Seattle	149,249	147,031	144,534	124,515	2.6
Denver	79,659	76,865	81,761	75,540	1.4
Totals	5,535,237	5,619,055	5,546,511	4,948,020	100.0%

CONCLUSIONS

SSA expanded its service delivery for individuals who needed a convenient method of accessing information, such as proof of receiving Social Security benefits, SSI, or Medicare. SSA's national initiative required that FOs reach out to beneficiaries and third-party requesters who needed proof of benefits and encourage them to use the Agency's self-service channels. Although SSA did not have specific data that shows a direct relationship between its outreach efforts and a change in the number of BEVE requests among its various service channels, the Agency provided data that showed online BEVE requests have increased while requests at FOs and via the national 800-number have declined.

SSA provides States electronic data for use in determining entitlement and eligibility for federally funded benefit programs. All States have access to some form of SSA data electronically to verify customers' benefits. SSA faces challenges in determining how each State's data systems, technical resources, or funding limits a State's use of these exchanges, or whether the States effectively use the data obtained via the exchanges. As such, we believe the Agency must continue its efforts to identify partners that could make better use of SSA data exchanges, which may ultimately reduce the number of customers requesting this information from SSA's FOs.

SSA reviewed the draft report and did not have any comments.

¹⁸ Data obtained from SSA's Office of Operations.

APPENDICES

Appendix A – CONGRESSIONAL REQUEST LETTER

SAM JOHNSON, TEXAS
SUBCOMMITTEE CHAIRMAN

PAT TIBERI, OHIO
TIM GRIFFIN, ARKANSAS
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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS
WASHINGTON, DC 20515

SUBCOMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SECURITY

May 1, 2014

The Honorable Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr.
Inspector General
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, Maryland 21235

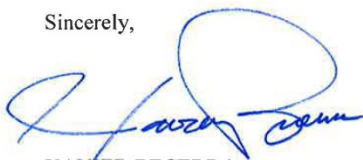
Dear Mr. O'Carroll:

I am writing to ask for your assistance in evaluating the Social Security Administration (SSA)'s past efforts to reduce the number of benefit verification requests made by individual beneficiaries at local offices and/or reduce the impact that responding to verification requests has on field office workloads. I am interested in knowing:

- 1) The specific strategies SSA national, regional, and local offices pursued to reduce the number of individual verification requests to field offices at their source and any effect of such strategies on the number of benefit verification requests by channel (data exchange, field office request, phone request, mySSA online request)
- 2) How SSA is using data exchanges to provide the data directly to agencies (including which states/agencies do not have access to data exchanges, written materials SSA provides to partners about using data exchanges, and reasons data partnerships may exist but not be fully utilized), and
- 3) How benefit verification request levels vary by office, by region, and over time.

I look forward to working with you and your staff to get the facts about what has been tried, where it was tried, and how well it worked before SSA implements a drastic change to current practice, one that may cause significant harm to beneficiaries. If you have any questions about my request, please contact Kathryn Olson or Morna Miller at the Social Security Subcommittee.

Sincerely,



XAVIER BECERRA
Ranking Member

Appendix B – SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

To accomplish our objectives, we:

- Reviewed pertinent sections of the Social Security Administration’s (SSA) policies and procedures, applicable laws, and regulations.
- Reviewed benefit verification (BEVE) production data for Fiscal Years (FY) 2011 through 2014.
- Developed and sent a detailed set of questions related to BEVEs for SSA to answer.
- Determined the specific strategies SSA’s national, regional, and local offices pursued to reduce the number of BEVE letter requests at field offices (FO).
- Determined the effect of SSA’s specific strategies on the number of BEVE requests issued by FOs, teleservice centers, online, and via data exchanges.
- Reviewed SSA’s efforts to provide BEVE data directly to States via data exchanges and inform its partners about the benefits of using data exchanges.
- Called representatives from the States of California, Georgia, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, and South Dakota to determine their use of, including any issues when using, SSA’s data exchanges to confirm benefits that beneficiaries received.

Because States use SSA BEVE data to determine entitlement and eligibility for federally funded benefit programs, our review on how SSA used its data exchanges to provide this information directly to agencies/States focused primarily on States’ use of the exchanges.

Our scope and review of internal controls was limited to gaining an understanding of SSA’s policies on issuing BEVEs. The principal entity audited was the Office of the Deputy Commissioner for Operations, Office of Public Service and Operations Support. We conducted our review between May and September 2014 in Atlanta, Georgia.

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.

Important Information: Changes In Certain Services



To meet the increasing demands for our service, we need to make changes to how we provide some services to our customers. To protect the integrity of the Social Security number and prevent fraud, we will discontinue providing Social Security number printouts effective August 1, 2014. If you need proof of your Social Security number and you do not have your Social Security card, you will need to request a replacement Social Security card by completing the *Application for a Social Security Card* (Form SS-5) and providing the required documentation.

Also, effective October 1, 2014, Social Security will stop providing benefit verification letters in our offices. You will still be able to get an instant letter online with a personal **my Social Security** account or you may call us toll-free to request a letter by mail.

See steps below for requesting a replacement Social Security card or obtaining your benefit verification letter. We also encourage you to visit www.socialsecurity.gov to learn about the many convenient online services available to you.

How to get replacement Social Security cards

Your Social Security card is your legal proof of your Social Security number. If you need proof of your number, and you can't find your card, you will need a replacement card. To get a replacement card, you must complete an *Application for a Social Security Card* (Form SS-5), which you can find online at www.socialsecurity.gov/ssnumber. You also will need documents proving your identity, age and citizenship or lawful immigration status.

In most cases, you can take, or mail, your completed application and original documents to any Social Security office. Go to www.socialsecurity.gov/locator to find the Social Security office or Social Security Card Center that serves your area. After processing, we will return your documents to you.

www.socialsecurity.gov

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How to get benefit verification letters

If you need proof of your Social Security or Supplemental Security Income benefits, you can get a benefit verification letter online instantly through a **my Social Security** account. To create an account, visit www.socialsecurity.gov/myaccount. With **my Social Security**, you can easily view, print or save an official letter that includes proof of your:

- Benefit amount and type;
- Medicare start date and withholding amount (if applicable); and
- Age.

If you are unable to go online, you can call our toll-free number, 1-800-772-1213 (TTY 1-800-325-0778) to request your letter be mailed to you. You also can use your annual cost-of-living adjustment notice or SSA Form 1099 as proof of income from Social Security.

For more information

A wealth of information and online service options are available on our website at www.socialsecurity.gov. Or you can call our toll-free number, 1-800-772-1213 (TTY 1-800-325-0778), and ask for helpful publications, such as:

- *How To Create An Online Account* (Publication No. 05-10540);
- *Your Social Security Number And Card* (Publication No. 05-10002); and
- *What You Can Do Online* (Publication No. 05-10121).



Social Security Administration
SSA Publication No. 05-10544
ICN 456001
Unit of Issue - HD (one hundred)
February 2014

Appendix D – SSA PUBLICATION NO. 05-10559 (FEB 2014)

Information For Agencies And Other Organizations

How To Get Proof Of Social Security Numbers Or Benefits



To efficiently meet the needs of the public, we will begin phasing-in two service changes. Effective August 1, 2014, we will stop providing Social Security number (SSN) printouts and effective October 1, 2014, we will discontinue issuing benefit verification letters in our offices. As a result, we are asking agencies and other organizations to use our specially developed online methods to obtain this information and assist our mutual customers in adjusting to this change.

Utilize Data Exchanges

Social Security has collaborated with federal, state and local agencies to build hundreds of robust data exchanges during the past few years. We currently provide more than 1.6 billion electronic verifications of Social Security numbers or benefit information to employers, state and local agencies, and other authorized third parties. Agencies and organizations should use available data exchanges to get the necessary verifications. For more information about our data exchanges, please visit us at www.socialsecurity.gov/dataexchange.

In addition, employers, departments of motor vehicles and other entities can obtain Social Security number verification in real time or overnight using online government services such as E-Verify (www.uscis.gov/e-verify) and Social Security's Business Services Online (www.socialsecurity.gov/bso/bsowelcome.htm).

How to get proof of a Social Security Number

Because Social Security number printouts are not official documents with security features and are easily misused or counterfeited, eliminating printouts will help prevent identity theft. A Social Security card is legal proof of a Social Security number. If your agency or organization requires proof and the person cannot produce a card, that person will need a replacement

card. To get a replacement card, a requestor must complete an *Application for a Social Security Card* (Form SS-5), available at www.socialsecurity.gov/ssnumber. The requestor also must provide original documents proving identity, age and citizenship or work-authorized immigration status.

Encourage Clients to Use my Social Security

If your agency or organization does not have a data exchange with Social Security, whenever possible, please assist the public with creating a **my Social Security** account at www.socialsecurity.gov/myaccount. There, people can get a benefit verification letter online instantly. With a **my Social Security** account, members of the public can also conduct other business with us, such as review earnings records and estimate retirement, disability, and survivors benefits.

For More Information

To assist customers, there is a wealth of information and online service options available on our website at www.socialsecurity.gov. Or you can call our toll-free number, 1-800-772-1213 (TTY 1-800-325-0778), and ask for helpful publications, such as:

- *How To Create An Online Account* (Publication No. 05-10540);
- *Your Social Security Number And Card* (Publication No. 05-10002); and
- *What You Can Do Online* (Publication No. 05-10121).

www.socialsecurity.gov

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Social Security Administration
SSA Publication No. 05-10559
February 2014

Appendix E – SSA PUBLICATION NO. 05-10552 (MAR 2014)

Information For Advocates, Social Service Agencies, And Other Third Parties

The Fastest Way To Verify Social Security And Supplemental Security Income Benefits



If your clients need proof of their Social Security or Supplemental Security Income benefits, let them know that they can get a benefit verification letter online instantly through a **my Social Security** account.

You can serve your clients faster because they no longer have to wait for a letter to be mailed to them. They can get the up-to-date information they need online, perhaps even from a computer in your office.

With **my Social Security** those who receive benefits can easily view, print, or save an official letter that includes proof of their:

- Benefit amount and type;
- Medicare start date and withholding amount; and
- Age.

Please do not send your clients to a Social Security office for a benefit verification letter. As of October 1, 2014, offices no longer will provide these letters onsite. Instead, send your clients to **www.socialsecurity.gov/myaccount**.

The fact sheet, *How To Create An Online Account* (Publication No. 05-10540), provides step-by-step instructions and explains how to get a benefit verification letter.

If your clients are unable to go online, they can call our toll-free number, 1-800-772-1213 (TTY 1-800-325-0778).



my Social Security

(over)

YOUR ONLINE ACCOUNT ... YOUR CONTROL ...

www.socialsecurity.gov/myaccount

Sample Online Benefit Verification Letter



Social Security Administration

Date: January 30, 2013
Claim Number: XXX-XX-0000A

JANE DOE
456 ANYWHERE AVENUE
MAINTOWN, USA 11111-1111

You asked us for information from your record. The information that you requested is shown below. If you want anyone else to have this information, you may send them this letter.

Information About Current Social Security Benefits

Beginning December 2012, the full monthly Social Security benefit before any deductions is \$223.90.
We deduct \$0.00 for medical insurance premiums each month.

The regular monthly Social Security payment is \$223.00.
(We must round down to the whole dollar.)

Social Security benefits for a given month are paid the following month. (For example, Social Security benefits for March are paid in April.)

Your Social Security benefits are paid on or about the fourth Wednesday of each month.

Information About Past Social Security Benefits

From December 2011 to November 2012, the full monthly Social Security benefit before any deductions was \$220.70.

We deducted \$0.00 for medical insurance premiums each month.

The regular monthly Social Security payment was \$220.00.
(We must round down to the whole dollar.)

Type of Social Security Benefit Information

You are entitled to monthly retirement benefits.

Date of Birth Information

The date of birth shown on our records is May 29, 1949.

If You Have Any Questions

If you have any questions, you may call us at 1-800-772-1213, or call your local Social Security office at 800-000-0000. We can answer most questions over the phone. You can also write or visit any Social Security office. The office that serves your area is located at:

SOCIAL SECURITY
123 MAIN STREET
MAINTOWN, USA 11112-1111

If you do call or visit an office, please have this letter with you. It will help us answer your questions.

Social Security Administration



my Social Security

YOUR ONLINE ACCOUNT ... YOUR CONTROL ...

www.socialsecurity.gov/myaccount

SSA Publication No. 05-10552 | TCN 463256 | Unit of Issue - HD | March 2014 | (Destroy prior editions)

Appendix F – SSA DEAR COLLEAGUE LETTER



Social Security

Dear Colleague:

In December, I wrote to tell you about some upcoming changes to the services we provide at Social Security offices across the country. Based on feedback we received from many of our stakeholders, we decided to delay the implementation of these changes to later in the year.

Beginning **August 2014**, we will no longer issue Social Security number printouts in our field offices. Individuals who need proof of their Social Security number and cannot find their card, will need to apply for a replacement card.

In addition, beginning **October 2014**, our field offices will stop providing BEVEs, except in emergency situations. Benefit verifications are available online, and can be obtained anytime by registering for a **my Social Security** account located at: www.socialsecurity.gov/myaccount, or requested through our national toll-free number: 1(800)772-1213.

Please share this information with others in your organization, and help us get the word out to all of your members and constituents. To assist your outreach activities, we developed and updated outreach materials on our third party page at: <http://www.socialsecurity.gov/thirdparty/whatsnew.html>.

I appreciate your continued support helping to inform the American people about these important service changes.

If you have questions, please feel free to contact us by phone at 1-800-772-1213.

Sincerely,

Stay connected with [Social Security](#):



Appendix G – STATES’ FISCAL YEAR 2013 USE OF SSA DATA EXCHANGES

States may use the Social Security Administration’s (SSA) Beneficiary and Earnings Data Exchange (BENDEX), State Data Exchange (SDX), and State Verification and Exchange System (SVES) to verify benefit information. The following ranks States’ Fiscal Year (FY) 2013 usage of BENDEX, SDX, and SVES from highest to lowest volume.

BENDEX, SDX, and SVES			BENDEX, SDX, and SVES		
Rank	State	Queries	Rank	State	Queries
1	New York	104,396,367	26	Nebraska	4,599,565
2	Oregon	88,185,399	27	Colorado	4,512,336
3	California	86,463,645	28	Oklahoma	4,242,960
4	Tennessee	62,149,829	29	New Mexico	3,735,124
5	Texas	58,305,882	30	Mississippi	3,734,009
6	Pennsylvania	54,751,715	31	New Jersey	3,275,190
7	Indiana	45,295,463	32	Maine	3,103,191
8	Massachusetts	29,996,810	33	Virginia	2,431,517
9	Ohio	28,668,148	34	Delaware	2,385,733
10	Washington	23,086,281	35	Rhode Island	2,270,637
11	North Carolina	21,662,689	36	South Carolina	1,999,525
12	Illinois	17,779,930	37	Kentucky	1,975,709
13	Florida	17,167,848	38	New Hampshire	1,923,567
14	Wisconsin	13,391,109	39	Hawaii	1,844,095
15	West Virginia	12,979,186	40	Alaska	1,571,005
16	Georgia	12,911,875	41	Kansas	1,398,639
17	Minnesota	12,884,935	42	Montana	1,368,024
18	Missouri	11,729,577	43	Idaho	545,179
19	Michigan	9,128,629	44	Nevada	423,629
20	Utah	8,714,306	45	Wyoming	326,931
21	Iowa	7,960,119	46	Maryland	317,456
22	Arizona	7,010,507	47	South Dakota	314,160
23	Connecticut	6,432,507	48	North Dakota	277,188
24	Louisiana	6,229,156	49	Vermont	244,020
25	Alabama	4,761,814	50	Arkansas	51,670

States may also use SSA's State Online Query–Internet (SOLQ/SOLQ-I) data exchange to verify benefit information. The following ranks States' FY 2013 usage of SOLQ and SOLQ-I from highest to lowest volume.

SOLQ		
Rank	State	Number of Queries
1	North Carolina	10,044,277
2	Illinois	5,403,380
3	Washington	4,037,351
4	Missouri	2,938,609
5	Florida	2,259,760
6	Maryland	1,811,778
7	Indiana	1,806,448
8	Utah	1,773,749
9	Louisiana	1,723,708
10	New Jersey	1,632,747
11	Tennessee	1,246,165
12	Nevada	1,057,927
13	Idaho	1,023,162
14	West Virginia	543,307
15	Wisconsin	476,162
16	Connecticut	399,331
17	Alaska	287,960
18	Kentucky	172,636
19	Montana	170,475
20	North Dakota	125,069

SOLQ-I		
Rank	State	Number of Queries
1	Texas	20,924,185
2	Wisconsin	13,830,581
3	Virginia	11,274,883
4	Michigan	5,707,166
5	Arkansas	1,773,055
6	Oklahoma	1,599,086
7	Colorado	970,872
8	New York	680,215
9	Idaho	509,820
10	Montana	126,419
11	Oregon	40,256
12	Wyoming	30,988
13	New Mexico	5,344
14	California	2,805
15	North Dakota	2,476
16	Pennsylvania	50
17	North Carolina	3

Data provided by SSA. We did not include U.S. territories and District of Columbia numbers.

Appendix H– MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS

Theresa Roberts, Director, Atlanta Audit Division

Frank Nagy, Audit Manager

Mike Leibrecht, Senior Auditor

MISSION

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Mail: Social Security Fraud Hotline
P.O. Box 17785
Baltimore, Maryland 21235

FAX: 410-597-0118

Telephone: 1-800-269-0271 from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time

TTY: 1-866-501-2101 for the deaf or hard of hearing