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**OFFICE OF  
THE INSPECTOR GENERAL**

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**SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION**

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**THREATS AGAINST  
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION  
EMPLOYEES OR PROPERTY**

November 2010

A-06-10-20123

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**EVALUATION  
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

The Inspector General Act created independent audit and investigative units, called the Office of Inspector General (OIG). The mission of the OIG, as spelled out in the Act, is to:

- Conduct and supervise independent and objective audits and investigations relating to agency programs and operations.
- 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:

- Independence to determine what reviews to perform.
- Access to all information necessary for the reviews.
- Authority to publish findings and recommendations based on the reviews.

## Vision

We strive for continual improvement in SSA's programs, operations and management by proactively seeking new ways to prevent and deter fraud, waste and abuse. We commit to integrity and excellence by supporting an environment that provides a valuable public service while encouraging employee development and retention and fostering diversity and innovation.



## SOCIAL SECURITY

### MEMORANDUM

Date: November 30, 2010

Refer To:

To: The Commissioner

From: Inspector General

Subject: Threats Against Social Security Administration Employees or Property (A-06-10-20123)

### OBJECTIVE

Our objective was to review the Social Security Administration's (SSA) process for reporting and responding to threats against its employees or property.

### BACKGROUND

Preventing workplace violence is a growing concern. Public interest and media attention have focused on recent incidences of violence at Federal facilities. High profile examples of these incidents include a February 2010 airplane attack on an Internal Revenue Service facility in Austin, Texas, and a March 2010 shooting at the Pentagon. Other recent examples of workplace-related violence highlight the nature of potential threats faced by SSA's employees. For instance, in January 2010, a gunman opened fire in a Las Vegas, Nevada, courthouse killing a security guard and wounding a U.S. Marshal. Authorities believed anger over perceived cuts to his Supplemental Security Income payments motivated the gunman.

SSA uses the Automated Incident Reporting System (AIRS), an online, incident-based reporting system, to collect data about incidents that affect the safety and security of SSA's personnel, property, or operational capabilities. Incidents may be criminal or noncriminal events, including threats or potential threats that affect the security and safety of SSA's employees, guards, visitors, facilities, and records.<sup>1</sup> Management is responsible for documenting all incidents that directly or indirectly adversely impact the safety and security of SSA's personnel, visitors, and property by completing the AIRS Incident Alert; obtaining statements or reports prepared by employees, guards, or others; and attaching those statements and reports to the Incident Alert. Regional and Component Physical Security Coordinators are responsible for security oversight under

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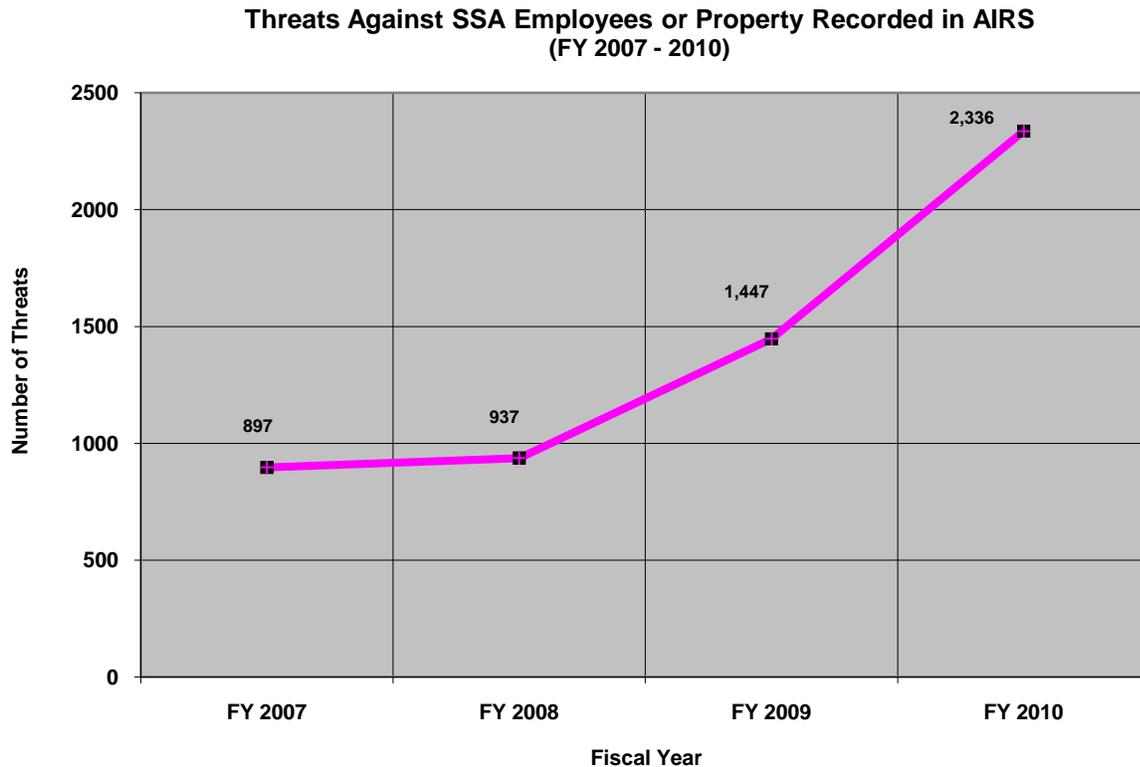
<sup>1</sup> SSA, Administrative Instructions Manual System (AIMS), General Administration Manual 12.07.01A, *Automated Incident Reporting System*.

the direction and guidance of the Office of Protective Security Services (OPSS) for their specific region. OPSS is responsible for maintaining the AIRS database. In addition, OPSS collects, collates, and analyzes data provided from the Incident Alerts.

In May 2010, we sent workplace safety-related questionnaires to 2,500 randomly selected SSA employees.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of our questionnaire was to assess employees' overall attitudes regarding workplace safety and the threat reporting process. Over approximately 1 month, 2,141 employees (85.6 percent) responded to the questionnaire. We provide a summary of these responses in this report.

## RESULTS OF REVIEW

SSA has experienced a dramatic increase in the number of reported threats against its employees or property. The number of threats recorded in AIRS increased by more than 50 percent in Fiscal Year (FY) 2009 and by more than 60 percent in FY 2010.



Threat reports come from a variety of sources. Most threats recorded in AIRS originated in SSA field offices. Typically, employees who are threatened report those threats to a supervisor. Management is responsible for recording information about the threat in AIRS. Additionally, the employee or supervisor can report the threat to law

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<sup>2</sup> We randomly selected 250 employees from each SSA region whose duties were likely to involve interaction with the public.

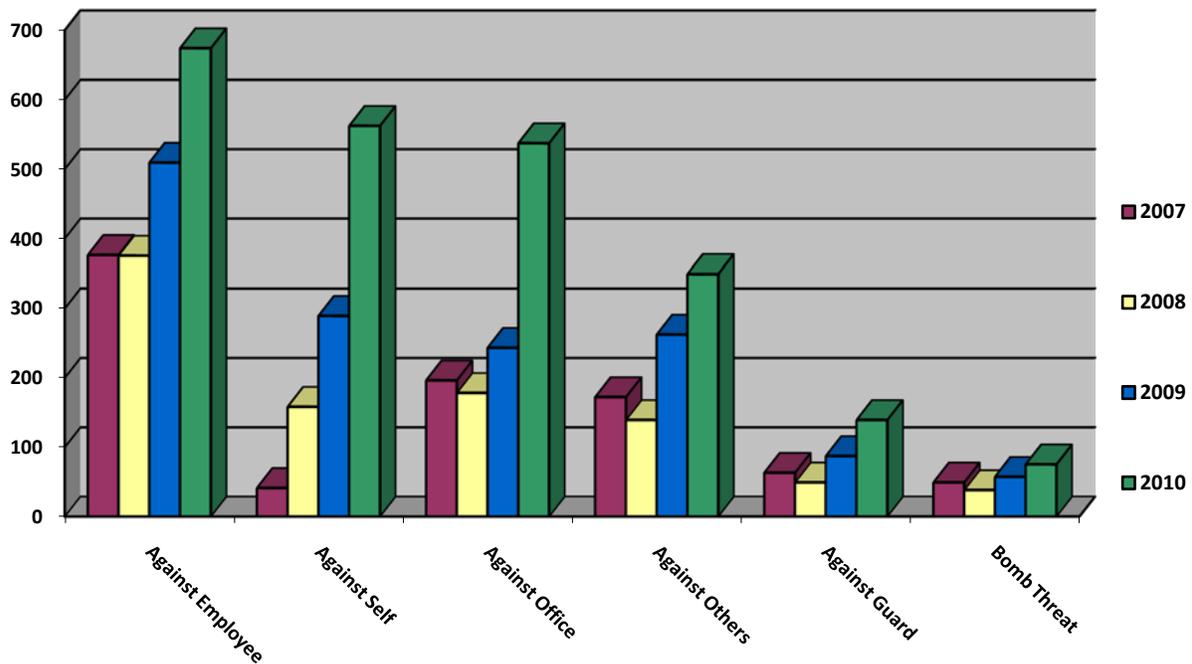
enforcement officials, Federal Protective Services (FPS),<sup>3</sup> and/or the Office of the Inspector General's (OIG) Office of Investigations (OI).

SSA categorized threats into six groups:

1. threats against an employee;
2. threats against self (suicide);
3. threats against the office;
4. threats against others;
5. threats against security guards; and
6. bomb threats.

The number of recorded threats in every reporting category has grown each year since 2008.

**Types of Threats Recorded in AIRS**  
(FY 2007 - 2010)



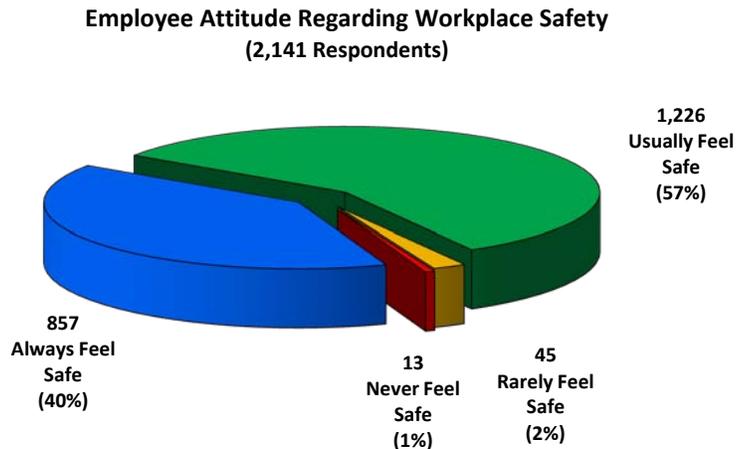
<sup>3</sup> FPS is a Federal law enforcement agency that provides integrated security and law enforcement services to federally owned and leased buildings, facilities, property, and other assets.

## EMPLOYEE QUESTIONNAIRE

To assess SSA employees' opinions regarding workplace safety and the threat reporting process, in May 2010, we conducted an email survey of 2,500 randomly selected SSA personnel whose duties were likely to involve interaction with the public. Over approximately 1 month, 2,141 (85.6 percent) employees responded to the questionnaire. We analyzed the results by each of SSA's 10 regions and compared each region's responses with the cumulative responses. We did not identify any significant variances between regional responses.

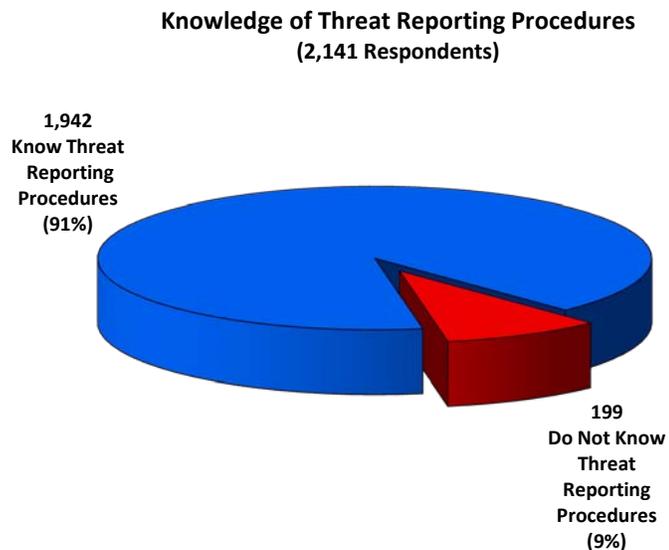
### Employee Attitude Regarding SSA Workplace Safety

We asked employees to describe their attitude regarding SSA workplace safety. Ninety-seven percent of respondents indicated they either always or usually felt safe at work.



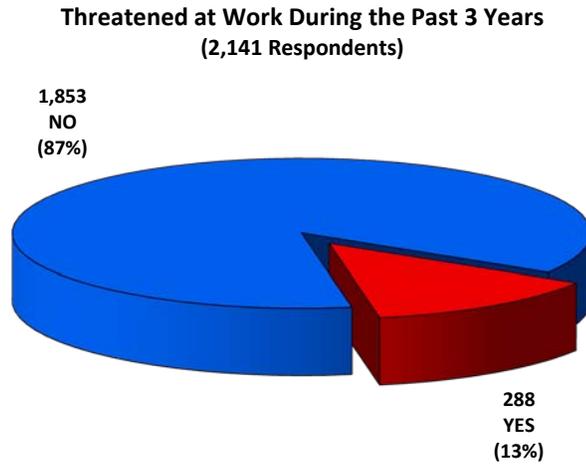
### Knowledge of Threat Reporting Procedures

We asked employees to indicate whether they were aware of SSA's threat reporting procedures. Ninety-one percent of respondents indicated they knew the procedures to follow if they were threatened at work.

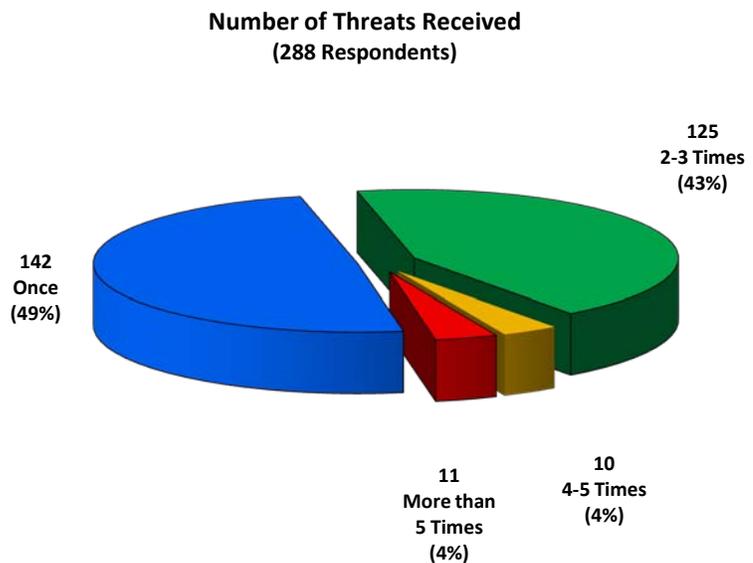


### Employees Who Have Been Threatened at Work

We asked whether, during the past 3 years, while working for SSA, the employee had been threatened at work. Of the 2,141 respondents, 288 (13 percent) indicated they had been threatened at work. The majority of these employees (82 percent) said the threat was communicated either through a face-to-face exchange or over the telephone. Even after enduring these experiences, 93 percent of the 288 employees indicated they either always or usually feel safe at work.



Of the 288 employees who had been threatened at work, 51 percent indicated they were threatened more than once during the past 3 years.



## Incident Reporting by Threatened Employees

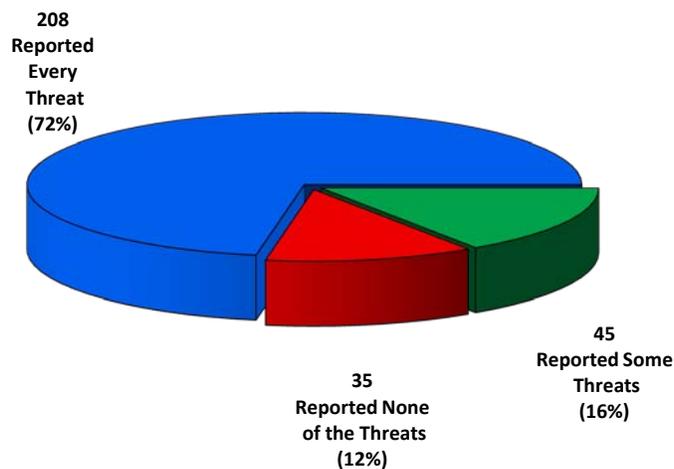
We asked the 288 employees who had been threatened at work to indicate whether they reported the threat(s) to their supervisor or another official. Of those, 208 (72 percent) indicated they reported every threat, and 45 (16 percent) indicated they reported some of the threats.

The primary reason respondents gave for why they did not report threats was that they did not believe the threat was serious. However, 14 respondents said they did not report the threat because either they did not believe management would take it seriously or they believed they would be negatively impacted as a result of reporting the threat.

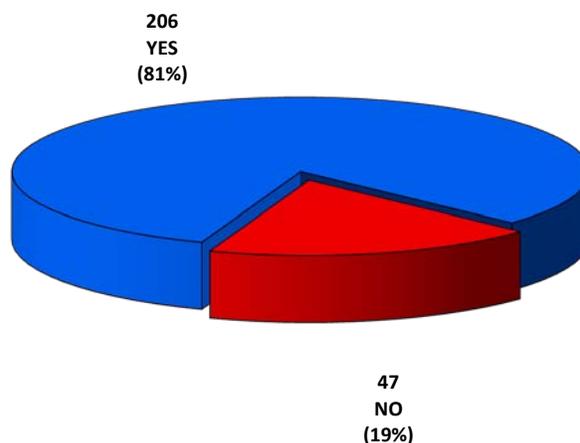
Of the 253 employees who reported a threat, 206 (81 percent) said they were satisfied with the Agency's response.

Of the 47 respondents who indicated they reported a threat but were not satisfied with the Agency's response, 37 stated management did not take the reported threat seriously or that management's response was untimely or insufficient. For example, five employees stated that management did not take action to remove the perpetrator from the office or prevent the individual from making future office visits.

Report Threat to Supervisor or Other Official  
(288 Respondents)



Reported a Threat - Satisfied with Agency Response  
(253 Respondents)



## SSA THREAT-REPORTING PROCEDURES

There is sometimes a fine line between an expression of anger and a threat. SSA personnel must use judgment in deciding whether the situation rises to the level of an incident. Employees should report all threat-related incidents to management as soon as possible. Management is responsible for documenting all incidents that directly or indirectly adversely impact the safety and security of SSA's personnel, visitors, and property by completing an AIRS Incident Alert.<sup>4</sup> SSA requires that managers document all incidents within 2 workdays.<sup>5</sup>

Once a manager records an incident report in AIRS, the system automatically routes incident notification to both the applicable Area Director and the designated regional or component Physical Security Coordinator. Each region should periodically evaluate AIRS incident data in their areas of responsibility to identify and document facility problems, justify additional protective measures, and participate in the development and implementation of training and awareness programs.

### Fact Sheets

In addition to the AIRS Incident Alert, the Deputy Commissioner for Operations (DCO) requires that managers prepare detailed fact sheets describing all threat-related incidents.<sup>6</sup> Like AIRS Incident Alerts, managers are required to prepare and submit fact sheets within 2 workdays after an incident. Operations developed a fact sheet template for this use. The various SSA regional offices determine the routing for fact sheets in their regions. However, all regional offices are required to submit the fact sheet as a Word document attached to an email with an executive summary to a DCO front office email account. The executive summary should provide enough information to give the audience an understanding of the incident without having to read the fact sheet. DCO staff review and distribute all fact sheets to the DCO. In many situations, Operations will also forward fact sheets to the Commissioner's office.

### Ban Letters

In instances where disruptive visitors make or imply threats, management may exercise the option of barring the individual from future visits to SSA's facilities through the issuance of a ban letter. A ban letter formally notifies the individual that SSA will no longer permit him or her to conduct business in person in the Agency's field offices without prior written approval; and if they attempt to do so, they will be subject to arrest for trespassing. Managers who initiate ban letters should input a high-risk indicator in

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<sup>4</sup> AIMS 12.07.03A.

<sup>5</sup> AIMS 12.07.04A.

<sup>6</sup> *Threats and Disruptive Visitors Fact Sheet Process, DCO Guidance for Regional Offices*, June 2010.

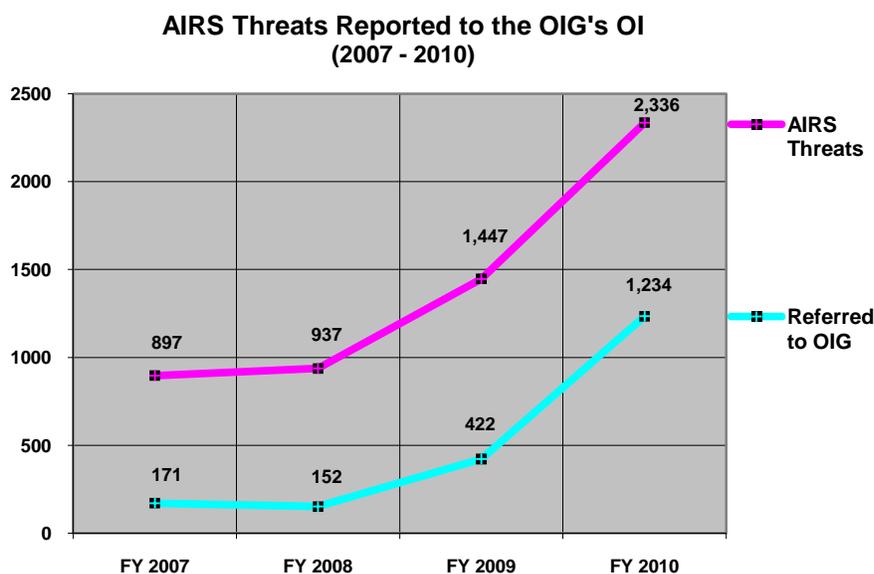
the Visitor Intake Process (VIP) application.<sup>7</sup> No matter which field office the individual visits, the VIP system will generate a high-risk alert to inform SSA personnel of the potential danger posed by the individual. SSA has not established express policies requiring ban letter issuance in response to threat related incidents. However, if a manager decides not to issue a ban letter, the DCO requires that the manager provide a rationale for the decision in both the fact sheet and executive summary.

Ban letters and VIP high-risk indicators cannot prevent threatening individuals from entering SSA's facilities. However, they can serve as a deterrent and provide SSA employees with information needed to notify security of a banned individual's presence or to contact local or OIG law enforcement personnel for assistance.

### Threat Incident Referrals to the OIG's Office of Investigations

The OIG's OI conducts and coordinates investigative activity related to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement in SSA's programs and operations. OI serves as the OIG's liaison to the Department of Justice on all matters related to investigations of SSA's programs and personnel and reports to the Attorney General when OIG has reason to believe Federal criminal law has been violated.

We compared the number of threats recorded in AIRS with the number of threat-related referrals forwarded to OIG and documented in its National Investigative Case Management System (NICMS).<sup>8</sup> Similar to the overall growth in the number of threats, SSA threat incident referrals to the OIG have also risen considerably since FY 2008.

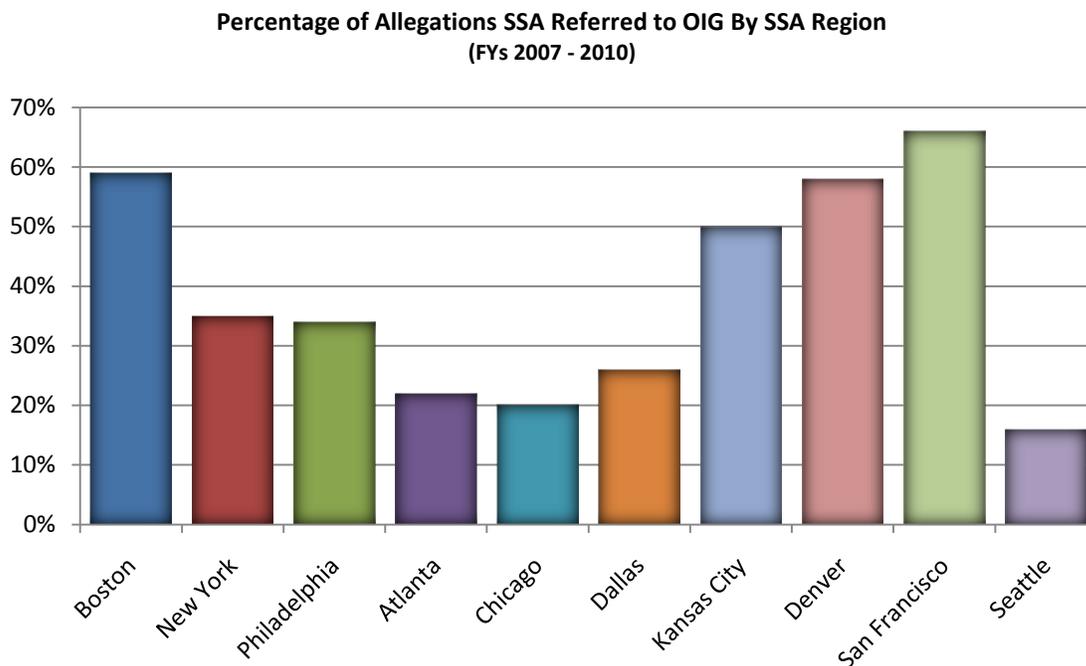


Based on its review of the particular facts and circumstances of the threat incident, OI can open a criminal case and assign a criminal investigator(s) to investigate the incident. SSA does not require that managers report threat incidents to the OIG.

<sup>7</sup> VIP is a computer program designed to help field offices automate and control all stages of in-office visitors and scheduled appointments. The program collects information about office visitors and appointments and provides management information that provides a picture of field office visitor and reception activities that help SSA analyze the effectiveness of its customer service.

<sup>8</sup> NICMS is a centralized database containing investigative information pertaining to allegations and cases of fraud, waste, and abuse in Social Security programs.

Instead, SSA leaves these decisions to the discretion of managers throughout the various SSA regions. We observed a wide variance in the percentage of threat incidents the various SSA regions referred to OIG.



The Boston, Kansas City, Denver, and San Francisco Regions refer 50 percent or more of threat incidents to the OIG. The Atlanta, Chicago, and Seattle Regions refer less than 25 percent of threat incidents to OIG.

## CONCLUSION

SSA has experienced a dramatic increase in the number of threats in every reporting category since 2008. The number of threats recorded in AIRS increased by more than 50 percent in FY 2009 and increased by more than 60 percent in FY 2010.

We received input from 2,141 SSA employees regarding their general opinions on workplace safety as well as SSA's threat reporting process. A vast majority of the employees was familiar with SSA's threat reporting procedures and "always" or "usually" felt safe at work. About 13 percent of respondents indicated they had been threatened at work during the past 3 years. A high percentage of these employees reported the threat(s) to management and was satisfied with the Agency's response. Even after receiving threats while at work, these employees stated they "always" or "usually" felt safe at work at rates relatively consistent with employees who had not endured similar experiences.

SSA has implemented procedures intended to ensure prompt threat incident reporting. SSA requires that managers timely document threat incidents in AIRS. However, SSA also requires completion of separate fact sheets and executive summaries describing

incidents with different levels of detail, and these documents are disseminated to various parties outside AIRS. We received no input to indicate this multi-tiered incident reporting process discouraged incident reporting. However, we believe it would be optimal to require that field managers create a single, comprehensive description of an incident in AIRS and have all required reporting emanate from the single input. SSA security staff stated the Agency is working to develop this functionality in AIRS.

When threat incidents occur, SSA can report the threats to the OIG. However, SSA decentralized the reporting decision to the discretion of Security Coordinators throughout the various SSA regions. As a result, we identified a wide disparity in the percentage of threat-related incidents the various SSA regions report to OIG.

## **AGENCY COMMENTS AND OIG RESPONSE**

SSA stated it had already recognized the disturbing trend in the number of employee threats and has taken action to protect its employees and the public. For example, SSA increased the presence of armed security guards, and is considering additional security enhancements, such as installation of duress alarms and closed circuit surveillance. The current incident reporting process requires managers to prepare three separate incident-related reports (AIRS report, fact sheet, and executive summary). SSA indicated it could not adopt our suggestion to have all required incident reporting emanate from a single input. SSA implied that implementation of the suggestion would eliminate incident fact sheets. To clarify, we offered the suggestion to simplify the incident reporting process—not eliminate any of the required reports—and acknowledge that fact sheets and executive summaries are important tools used extensively by SSA executives and the Commissioner. We envisioned SSA staff generating fact sheets and executive summaries from the incident data input into the AIRS database.



Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr.

# *Appendices*

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APPENDIX A – Acronyms

APPENDIX B – Scope and Methodology

APPENDIX C – Agency Comments

APPENDIX D – OIG Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

## Acronyms

|       |   |
|-------|---|
| AIMS  | Administrative Instructions Manual System     |
| AIRS  | Automated Incident Reporting System           |
| DCO   | Deputy Commissioner for Operations            |
| FPS   | Federal Protective Services                   |
| FY    | Fiscal Year                                   |
| NICMS | National Investigative Case Management System |
| OI    | Office of Investigations                      |
| OIG   | Office of the Inspector General               |
| OPSS  | Office of Protective Security Services        |
| SSA   | Social Security Administration                |
| VIP   | Visitor Intake Process                        |

# Scope and Methodology

To accomplish our objective, we:

- Reviewed applicable regulations and the Social Security Administration's (SSA) policies and procedures.
- Interviewed various SSA and Office of the Inspector General (OIG) Office of Investigations staff.
- Reviewed prior OIG reports.
- Obtained and analyzed Automated Incident Reporting System summary data from SSA identifying 5,617 threats reported during the period October 2006 through September 2010.
- Obtained and analyzed threat data contained in the OIG's National Investigative Case Management System identifying 1,979 threats that SSA referred to OIG during the period October 2006 through September 2010.
- Worked with SSA Human Resources staff to identify all SSA employees who were likely to interact with the public, excluding Headquarters, OIG, and Office of Quality Performance personnel. Based on our selection criteria, Human Resources identified 51,266 SSA employees.
  - We randomly selected 2,500 of the 51,266 employees to participate in our survey involving questions about workplace safety as well as SSA's threat reporting process.
  - In May 2010, we sent electronic questionnaires to all 2,500 employees.
  - Over approximately 1 month, we received questionnaire responses from 2,141 employees (85.6 percent).
  - We summarized questionnaire responses.

We conducted fieldwork from April to October 2010. The entities reviewed were the Offices of the Deputy Commissioner for Operations and Budget, Finance and Management. We determined the data used in this report were sufficiently reliable given the review objective and their intended use. We conducted our review in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's *Quality Standards for Inspections*.

## Agency Comments



## SOCIAL SECURITY

### MEMORANDUM

**Date:** October 26, 2010

**Refer To:**

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

**From:** James A. Winn /s/  
Executive Counselor  
to the Commissioner

**Subject:** Office of the Inspector General (OIG) Draft Report, "Threats Against Social Security Administration Employees or Property" (A-06-10-20123)—INFORMATION

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

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

Attachment

**COMMENTS ON THE OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL (OIG) DRAFT REPORT, “THREATS AGAINST SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION EMPLOYEES OR PROPERTY” (A-06-10-20123)**

Thank you for the opportunity to review the subject report. We offer the following comments.

**GENERAL COMMENT**

As you state in your evaluation report, we are experiencing a dramatic increase in reported threats to our employees and property. Prior to your review, we had already recognized the disturbing trend ourselves, and we began taking additional actions to protect our employees and the public. It is reassuring that your survey indicates the vast majority of our employees feel safe at work. This notwithstanding, we can do even more, and we are working to standardize security in all our offices. For example, we are increasing the presence of armed guards, and we are considering other security enhancements such as duress alarms and closed-circuit surveillance.

**COMMENT ON EVALUATION REPORT CONCLUSION**

You state, “However, we believe it would be optimal to require that field managers create a single, comprehensive description of an incident in AIRS and have all required reporting emanate from the single input.” At this time, we cannot adopt your suggestion. We may consider it for the future, but for now, AIRS and “fact sheets” are both important tools. Our executives use the fact sheets extensively, and our Commissioner takes a particular interest in reviewing them to keep abreast of threats to employees and the public. We will continue using both reporting processes for the foreseeable future.

## **OIG Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments**

### ***OIG Contacts***

Ronald Gunia, Director, Dallas Audit Division

Jason Arrington, Audit Manager

### ***Acknowledgments***

In addition to those named above:

Ashley Moore, Auditor

Jeff Brown, Acting Director, Technical Services Division

Rajula Chandran, Senior IT Specialist

Brennan Kraje, Statistician

For additional copies of this report, please visit our Website at [www.ssa.gov/oig](http://www.ssa.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-06-10-20123.

## ***DISTRIBUTION SCHEDULE***

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Majority and Minority Staff Director, Subcommittee on Social Security

Chairman and Ranking Minority Member, Committee on the Budget, House of Representatives

Chairman and Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

Chairman and Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

Chairman and Ranking Minority, Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

Chairman and Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Senate

Chairman and Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Senate

Chairman and Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Finance

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

## **Overview of the Office of the Inspector General**

The Office of the Inspector General (OIG) is comprised of an Office of Audit (OA), Office of Investigations (OI), Office of the Counsel to the Inspector General (OCIG), Office of External Relations (OER), and Office of Technology and Resource Management (OTRM). To ensure compliance with policies and procedures, internal controls, and professional standards, the OIG also has a comprehensive Professional Responsibility and Quality Assurance program.

### **Office of Audit**

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.

### **Office of Investigations**

OI conducts investigations related to fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement in SSA programs and operations. This includes wrongdoing by applicants, beneficiaries, contractors, third parties, or SSA employees performing their official duties. This office serves as liaison to the Department of Justice on all matters relating to the investigation of SSA programs and personnel. OI also conducts joint investigations with other Federal, State, and local law enforcement agencies.

### **Office of the Counsel to the Inspector General**

OCIG provides independent legal advice and counsel to the IG on various matters, including statutes, regulations, legislation, and policy directives. OCIG also advises the IG on investigative procedures and techniques, as well as on legal implications and conclusions to be drawn from audit and investigative material. Also, OCIG administers the Civil Monetary Penalty program.

### **Office of External Relations**

OER manages OIG's external and public affairs programs, and serves as the principal advisor on news releases and in providing information to the various news reporting services. OER develops OIG's media and public information policies, directs OIG's external and public affairs programs, and serves as the primary contact for those seeking information about OIG. OER prepares OIG publications, speeches, and presentations to internal and external organizations, and responds to Congressional correspondence.

### **Office of Technology and Resource Management**

OTRM supports OIG by providing information management and systems security. OTRM also coordinates OIG's budget, procurement, telecommunications, facilities, and human resources. In addition, OTRM is the focal point for OIG's strategic planning function, and the development and monitoring of performance measures. In addition, OTRM receives and assigns for action allegations of criminal and administrative violations of Social Security laws, identifies fugitives receiving benefit payments from SSA, and provides technological assistance to investigations.