

Match of Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services Death Information Against Social Security Administration Records A-06-18-50653



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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To determine the appropriateness of payments the Social Security Administration (SSA) issued to beneficiaries who were deceased according to Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) records.

Background

CMS provides SSA a daily data file of CMS beneficiary death information. When SSA receives death information for a current beneficiary, its systems generate a death alert. SSA employees must verify CMS death information by attempting to contact the alleged decedent, or decedent's family, by telephone. If employees confirm the beneficiary's death, they should post the death information to SSA records and monitor to ensure SSA systems terminate the benefit payments. If employees cannot make telephone contact, they send a letter requesting the beneficiary contact a field office. If the beneficiary does not visit the field office or respond to the letter within 45 days, SSA considers the person deceased and should terminate the benefits.

We obtained CMS data that provided the personally identifiable information of approximately 78.4 million Social Security numberholders who died from 1960 through 2018. We matched the data against SSA's payment records to identify beneficiaries in current payment status whose personally identifiable information matched that of a deceased individual in the CMS data.

Findings

We identified 3,084 current beneficiaries whose personally identifiable information matched that of a deceased individual in the CMS death data. In February 2020, we provided SSA the beneficiaries' death information. As of July 2021, SSA staff had determined 142 of the beneficiaries were alive, and CMS death information was erroneous. SSA staff had also terminated payments to 2,679 beneficiaries and determined SSA had issued \$125.2 million in payments after the beneficiaries' deaths. Identification and correction of these discrepancies prevented \$33.9 million in additional improper payments over a 12-month period.

We reviewed 50 randomly selected cases and found that SSA had received most beneficiaries' death information from CMS and/or States. However, SSA systems did not generate and route death alerts to the beneficiaries' servicing field office for verification or field office personnel cleared the death alerts without inputting the death information to SSA records or ensuring SSA systems terminated the beneficiaries' payments.

We also identified 49 instances where it appeared SSA input erroneous, post-2018 dates of death in the beneficiaries' records. This could prevent SSA from attempting to recover payments issued after the beneficiaries' deaths.

Recommendations

We made three recommendations for corrective action. SSA agreed with our recommendations.

Agency Actions Resulting from the Audit

In addition to resolving the vital status of 2,821 of the 3,084 beneficiaries and identifying more than \$125 million in payments after death, on June 25, 2021, SSA revised its policy to clarify that employees should use decedents' alleged date of death when they resolve death alerts. SSA also corrected death information on 8 of 49 deceased beneficiaries' records and identified payments after death totaling \$231,998.