

Sensitive Information at Social Security Administration Offices

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To determine whether sensitive information, such as personally identifiable information (PII), in Social Security Administration (SSA) offices was at risk for disclosure to the public.

Background

Generally, SSA cannot conduct business without exchanging PII and other sensitive information with the public. PII can be used to distinguish or trace that individual's identity, such as name, Social Security number (SSN), or date of birth.

Safeguarding sensitive information has been a priority for SSA since its creation in 1935. The first regulation the Social Security Board adopted addressed privacy and the disclosure of Social Security records. Subsequent regulations and laws, including the *Privacy Act of 1974*, further defined the Agency's responsibilities to protect sensitive information. Accordingly, the Agency requires that employees protect PII, has established guidance and resources for employees, and annually reminds all employees of that requirement and the availability of those resources.

Our Findings

In April 2013, we made unannounced visits to 38 SSA offices: 24 field offices, 12 hearing offices, and 2 Social Security card centers. During those visits, we either observed or overheard sensitive information at risk in 13 (34 percent) of the 38 offices we visited.

For example, at the front counter area of one field office, we observed a Social Security card (with name and SSN), a letter from SSA to a beneficiary (with their name and address), and a printed application for benefits (with the applicant's name, SSN, and claim-specific information). These documents are common in the daily conduct of business at SSA offices. Additionally, SSA could not control how careful the public was with sensitive information, even though staff remind visitors of the need to be careful.

Conversely, although offices generally were not expecting our visits, we did not observe sensitive information at risk in the remaining 25 offices (66 percent) visited.

Sensitive information, including PII, is at risk for inadvertent disclosure in SSA offices where the public transacts business. Recognizing this, the Agency has taken steps to safeguard sensitive information, including emphasizing to all employees their duty to protect this information and building privacy protections into the physical design of offices.

Our Conclusion

SSA should continue to remind staff on an on-going basis of the importance of protecting sensitive information.