

Social Security Numbers on Notices in the Online Retrieval System

A-02-13-13040



September 2013

Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) could limit the display of Social Security numbers (SSN) on notices sent to beneficiaries that were maintained in the Agency's Online Retrieval System (ORS).

Background

SSA sends about 350 million notices to beneficiaries each year. Many of these notices include SSNs and are stored in ORS. ORS allows SSA staff to review notices when beneficiaries contact SSA to discuss the notices they received. Through ORS, staff can view, reprint, send, and save notices addressed to beneficiaries.

Our Findings

SSA could limit the display of SSNs on the majority of new notices maintained in ORS and still reference notices by SSN in ORS. SSA could format notices without SSNs by using a 5-A record. While SSNs would be included as part of the notice file, allowing them to be referenced by SSN in ORS, the SSN would not be displayed on the printed notice that is mailed to a beneficiary.

SSA had not estimated the cost of removing SSNs from all notices maintained in ORS. It had only produced estimates on the cost of removing SSNs from some of the notices maintained in ORS. In FY 2012, SSA estimated it would incur 13 to 18 work years and pay \$2.3 to \$3.3 million to remove the SSNs from the 123 million notices formatted by Target Notice Architecture, a system that formats most of the notices originated by the different notice-generating programs. Additionally, SSA estimated it would incur over \$35 million in operational costs per year if it removed SSNs from notices because staff would need additional time to look up the SSNs of beneficiaries who contact SSA to discuss their notices but who do not know their SSNs.

Our Recommendations

1. Re-evaluate and document the assumptions used to develop the Agency's cost estimates to remove SSNs on notices.
2. Research cost-effective ways the Agency can limit SSNs on notices while still allowing for ORS' current functionality.

The Agency partially agreed with Recommendation 1 and fully agreed with Recommendation 2.