

The Social Security Administration's Pre-release Procedures of Institutionalized Individuals

A-02-14-24085



February 2015

Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To determine the effectiveness of the Social Security Administration's (SSA) processing of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) claims under the Pre-release Program.

Background

Congress enacted legislation requiring that SSA provide a way for individuals to apply for benefits before they are released from a public institution. SSA's pre-release procedures were designed to ensure eligible individuals receive timely SSI payments when they re-enter the community. The pre-release procedures allow SSA to take and process an institutionalized individual's SSI application several months before the individual's anticipated release. It also allows for a prospective determination of potential eligibility and payment amount based on anticipated circumstances. The pre-release procedures apply to correctional facilities and other public institutions.

SSA will process applications for individuals likely to be eligible for SSI and expected to be released within 30 days of claim approval. SSA staff is instructed to expedite determinations of potential SSI eligibility for individuals applying under the pre-release procedures.

Findings

While the Pre-release Program provided recipients in our review more timely SSI payments after their release from an institution, SSA's management of the Pre-release Program could be more effective. Specifically, SSI recipients who received pre-release assistance received their first SSI payment after release from an institution more timely than those whose initial applications were not processed as pre-release cases. However, the use of pre-release agreements varied among the States we reviewed.

SSA did not update agreements annually, as required by SSA's policy. Some institutional contacts reported they did not have a point of contact at SSA for the Pre-release Program and/or they were not aware their institution had an agreement with SSA.

SSA staff reported that the Pre-release Program did not have specific performance measures or goals to determine the Program's effectiveness.

Recommendations

We recommend that SSA:

1. Manage the Pre-release Program consistently to ensure SSA has agreements with as many institutions as possible in each State.
2. Renew existing pre-release agreements as directed by policy.
3. Ensure all institutions with pre-release agreements are aware of their and SSA's responsibilities under the pre-release agreement and who to contact at SSA with questions.
4. Develop measureable performance indicators and goals to help measure SSA's effectiveness in providing individuals a way to apply for benefits before they are released from a public institution, which SSA is required to do by law.

SSA agreed with Recommendations 1, 2, and 3 but disagreed with Recommendation 4.