

Title II Spousal or Widow(er) Beneficiaries Whose Unreported Marriages Caused Improper Title XVI Payments

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To identify Title II spousal or widow(er) beneficiaries who received improper Title XVI payments because they did not report their marriages to the Social Security Administration (SSA).

Background

When determining individuals' Title XVI payment eligibility and amounts, SSA evaluates the income and resources of the individuals and their spouses as well as the spouses' Title XVI eligibility. Therefore, SSA requires that recipients report any changes in their marital status.

Applicants for Title II spousal or widow(er) benefits are required to provide proof of marriage to, and/or divorce from, the workers. Further, SSA policy requires that employees review any previous Title II or XVI claims for relevant information and refer any discrepancies to the Office of the Inspector General before it processes the Title II claim.

We identified 122,926 Title II spousal or widow(er) beneficiaries who received Title XVI payments as single individuals on or after January 1, 2000. However, these beneficiaries also reported that they were married on or after January 1, 2000 when they filed for Title II spousal or widow(er) benefits.

Findings

We reviewed a random sample of 250 Title II spousal or widow(er) beneficiaries to determine whether they reported their marriages to SSA while they were receiving Title XVI payments as single individuals. Of the 250 beneficiaries, we identified 41 who did not appear to have reported their marriages to SSA while they were receiving Title XVI payments and may have received improper Title XVI payments because of spousal income.

We referred these 41 beneficiaries to our Office of Investigations (OI) to investigate their living arrangements while they were receiving Title XVI payments. OI determined seven beneficiaries were not living with their spouses so were not overpaid, and one beneficiary had potentially committed fraud, resulting in a \$104,998 overpayment.

OI did not pursue investigations on the remaining 33 beneficiaries because the potential overpayments were below the applicable U.S. Attorneys' thresholds for prosecution and/or the periods of potential overpayment were outside the statute of limitations. Since OI did not pursue investigations, we referred these 33 beneficiaries to SSA to assess any overpayments. Of the 33 beneficiaries, SSA determined

- 22 were not living with their spouses so were not overpaid, and
- for 7, there was insufficient evidence to proceed with a review.

For the remaining four beneficiaries, SSA's review was ongoing as of July 2016.

Given that our audit did not identify a significant number of beneficiaries who were living with their spouses and overpaid while receiving Title XVI payments, we are not making a recommendation.