



Office of the Inspector General

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

## Press Release

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<http://oig.ssa.gov/>

Contact: Jonathan Lasher

Phone: (410) 965-2671

### **SSA Inspector General Combats Social Security-Related Internet Fraud**

Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr., Inspector General for the Social Security Administration (SSA), today announced the Office of the Inspector General's (OIG) successful enforcement and outreach efforts to combat a recent increase in Internet-based Social Security-related fraud.

Section 1140 of the *Social Security Act* prohibits the use of SSA words, letters, and symbols to convey a false impression of a connection with SSA. Section 1140 also prohibits the fee-based reproduction, reprinting, or distribution of SSA forms, applications, or other publications without authorization from SSA. The OIG is responsible for enforcing Section 1140 of the *Act*. Recently, we have seen an alarming increase in the number of websites that mislead consumers into believing they are on SSA's official website or that charge fees for forms or applications that SSA provides for free.

To combat this type of fraud, we have, since the beginning of Fiscal Year 2012, successfully shut down, or brought into compliance, 25 websites. We have also assessed significant civil monetary penalties against some website operators. Moreover, we have met and collaborated with more than a dozen companies, including major search engine operators, domain registrars, and financial institutions, that may interact with individuals operating misleading Internet sites. For example:

- Credit card companies have helped us locate fraudulent websites and identify the perpetrators. They have also helped combat this type of fraud by ceasing to accept funds or process payment transactions from websites that violate Section 1140.
- Google and Microsoft (which powers both Yahoo! and Bing search engines) have taken positive steps in the fight against advertising violations of Section 1140. Both companies have modified their advertising policies to broadly reflect the prohibitions set forth in Section 1140 (*i.e.*, policies that prohibit advertisers from creating the false impression of a connection to a governmental agency), while also prohibiting advertising for the sale of free government forms.

We plan to expand our outreach efforts and collaboration with the private sector even further, to ensure that Internet-based avenues such as mobile apps and networking sites do not become the next vehicles for Social Security-related fraud.

"Social Security touches the lives of virtually every American. In recognizing this, the Congress enacted Section 1140 as a consumer protection tool to combat unscrupulous individuals who seek to take advantage of consumers. We are able to impose hefty penalties against these individuals, but we have also found that collaborating with the private sector is essential in fighting this type of fraud and protecting consumers," said Inspector General O'Carroll.

Anyone wishing to learn more about our Section 1140 outreach and enforcement efforts may read this [article](#) recently published in the Council of Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's *Journal of Public Inquiry*. In addition, we encourage anyone who suspects a website of violating Section 1140 to report that to the OIG's Fraud Hotline through our website, <http://oig.ssa.gov/report>.