

Denied Child's Insurance Benefit Claims

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To determine whether Social Security Administration (SSA) employees appropriately denied claims for child's insurance benefits for reasons unrelated to disability.

Background

The Old-Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance program provides monthly benefits to retired and disabled workers and their dependents as well as the survivors of deceased workers. In general, to be entitled to benefits, a child of a retired, disabled, or deceased worker must:

- 1) be unmarried;
- 2) be under age 18, a full-time elementary or secondary school student under age 19, or have become disabled before age 22; and
- 3) meet certain relationship and dependency requirements.

Generally, an SSA employee may appropriately deny a claim when the employee properly completes all necessary actions and determines the applicant has not established the claimant meets the requirements to be entitled to child's insurance benefits.

We reviewed a random sample of 100 claims from a population of 21,533 claims filed from January 2019 through July 2023 that SSA employees approved for benefits in July 2023 or earlier and a random sample of 100 claims from a population of 75,424 claims filed from January 2019 through July 2023 SSA employees did not approve for benefits as of July 2023.

Results

Of the 96,957 claims in our review, we estimate SSA employees correctly denied 37,712 (39 percent) and incorrectly denied 24,555 (25 percent). As a result of employee errors, SSA did not pay these beneficiaries approximately \$92.2 million in benefits and delayed paying these beneficiaries approximately \$87.7 million in benefits to which they were entitled.

We could not conclude whether employees correctly denied the remaining 34,690 claims (36 percent). This includes an estimated 28,661 claims SSA employees denied before they appropriately completed all required actions; therefore, there was not enough information in SSA's records to determine whether Agency employees appropriately denied the claims.

The Agency needs to improve its controls to ensure employees appropriately deny child's insurance benefits for reasons unrelated to disability. For example, Development Worksheets could include reminders for employees to request applicants provide the evidence needed to establish claimants' entitlement to benefits, and letters to applicants should list all the required evidence and explain the types of evidence applicants could provide. Without improvements, employees will continue incorrectly denying claims, and the Agency will not pay thousands of child beneficiaries the benefits to which they are entitled.

Recommendations

We recommend that SSA:

1. Review and correct the claims we identified, as appropriate, including development in accordance with SSA's policies.
2. To prevent future errors, establish controls to ensure employees request all relevant evidence and document all required actions in its systems before denying a claim for child's insurance benefits, when required.

SSA agreed to implement our recommendations.