

Follow-up Review of Numident Death Information Not Included on the Death Master File 062301



July 2024

Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) took corrective action to address the finding and recommendation in our September 2016 report, *Numident Death Information Not Included on the Death Master File*.

Background

SSA matches death reports it receives from various sources against its payment records and records dates of death in the Numident, an electronic file that contains personally identifiable information for each person issued a Social Security number (SSN). SSA uses Numident information to create its full file of death information, which we refer to as the full Death Master File (DMF). SSA is required to share its full DMF, as authorized, with Federal benefit-paying agencies to prevent improper payments.

In a 2016 review, we found SSA excluded from the DMF personally identifiable information for approximately 8.7 million numberholders whose Numident records included their date of death. The omission of death records from the DMF could result in Federal benefit-paying agencies that rely on the DMF making erroneous payments and failing to detect inaccurate or unreported deaths. We recommended SSA develop a methodology to incorporate these numberholders' information into the DMF. SSA agreed with our recommendation.

Results

As part of its Continuing Death Data Improvements clean-up project, SSA took corrective action on approximately 7.7 million of the 8.7 million records we identified in our 2016 report and now includes those numberholders' death information in the full DMF.

Based on the application of 13 screening criteria, SSA continued to exclude from the DMF information on 941,383 numberholders with death information on the Numident. SSA developed and applied screening criteria to prevent the inclusion of living numberholders' information or invalid dates of death in the DMF. However, we disagree with SSA's rationale for the continued exclusion from the DMF of at least 915,534 records. In these cases, the criteria SSA applied did not raise doubt about the validity of the numberholders' death information in the Numident.

At the time of our review, SSA had no plan to revisit the exclusion of all 941,383 records. Withholding the records could prevent DMF and Do Not Pay portal users that rely on SSA's death information from being informed the numberholders are deceased. Taking action to include death information for hundreds of thousands of deceased numberholders whose information is omitted from the DMF would enhance Government-wide improper payment prevention and detection. SSA officials stated it inputs death information into its systems to administer SSA's programs, not to administer other agencies' programs. However, starting in December 2023, SSA has been required to provide its full DMF to the U.S. Department of Treasury's Bureau of the Fiscal Service to use in its Do Not Pay initiative.

We also determined that SSA was issuing payments to 98 of the 941,383 numberholders with death information on the Numident. As of April 2024, SSA had terminated benefits to 14 of these beneficiaries and added their death information to the DMF. We provided the other 84 numberholders' information to SSA for review.

Recommendation

We recommended SSA add the 915,534 numberholders' death information to the DMF, develop a plan to add the remaining numberholders' death information to the DMF, and review and take appropriate action on the current payment status cases. SSA disagreed with the first two recommendations but agreed to review the current payment status cases.