



Payment Accuracy Task Force Report: SSI Unearned Income

Executive Summary

The Social Security Administration (SSA) has issued a self-challenge to increase the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payment accuracy rate to 96 percent by Fiscal Year (FY) 2002. This action was prompted, in part, by the General Accounting Office's (GAO) 1997 designation of SSI as a high-risk program.¹

The Payment Accuracy Task Force Initiative, created in 1996 through a cooperative effort between SSA and the Office of the Inspector General (OIG), assists the Agency with meeting its goal to improve payment accuracy. The Initiative is guided by an Associate Commissioner-level Steering Committee. It selects payment issues and charters intercomponent issue teams to develop agency-wide recommendations for policy, programmatic and operational improvements.

The Task Force has selected SSI unearned income for this, its third review. To analyze sources and causes of SSI unearned income payment errors, we gathered information from as many sources as possible during our 120-day charter, from March 1 through June 28, 1999. We assessed viability of prior SSA, GAO and OIG recommendations; analyzed 216 FY 1997 Index of Dollar Accuracy SSI unearned income deficiency case folders and the related data base; and made 10 site visits to field offices in California, Texas, and Maryland. During the site visits, we met with 20 field office managers and 57 field office employees; and, in the California field offices, we interviewed 16 SSI recipients. We sought additional input from over 30 key contacts in various SSA components, members of our Task Force Steering Committee, and our issue team's SSI experts.

¹ *High Risk Series: An Overview*, GAO/HR-97-1, February 1997; *Supplemental Security Income: Action Needed on Long-Standing Problems Affecting Program Integrity*, GAO/HEHS-98-158, September 1998.

Findings, Concerns, and Recommendations

□ Section I: The Payment Accuracy Issue Team Recommends Changes to Improve SSI Unearned Income Payment Accuracy

- *Reinforce Reporting Responsibilities*

Recommendation 1 -- *Specific to SSI unearned income, include a handout listing the types of unearned income in the recordkeeper or print the list on the recordkeeper folder itself.*

In general, remind field offices of the Program Operations Manual System (POMS) guidance for using and distributing the recordkeeper folders and of the reordering process.

- *Provide Additional POMS Guidance About Gambling and Lottery Winnings and Losses*

Recommendation 2 -- *Retitle the POMS section, Prizes, as Gambling and Lottery Winnings and Other Prizes so claims representatives (CR) can more easily locate instructions about properly counting gambling/lottery winnings.*

Recommendation 3 -- *Modify the Modernized Supplemental Security Income Claims System (MSSIC) Income Menu (IMEN) screen by adding parenthetical information, which includes a reference to gambling and lottery winnings, under "OTHER INCOME OR SUPPORT NOT PREVIOUSLY MENTIONED."*

Recommendation 4 -- *Modify the MSSIC Income Other (IOTH) screen so that gambling and lottery winnings can be listed under "TYPE RECEIVED."*

- *Include the SSI Unearned Income Report and Prior Payment Accuracy Task Force Reports in the Agency's SSI High-Risk Tracking Documents and Related Reports*

Recommendation 5 -- *Ensure that recommendations from the SSI Unearned Income Report and prior Payment Accuracy Task Force reports are included in the Agency's monthly SSI Initiatives Tracking Report,*

subsequent SSI management reports, and other information systems related to SSI high-risk efforts.

□ **Section II: The Payment Accuracy Issue Team Recommends Modifications for Two Recently Initiated SSI High-Risk Activities That Address Unearned Income Payment Errors**

- *Adapting the Unearned Income Portion of the April 1999 Interactive Video Training for Virtual On-Line Training*

Recommendation 6 -- As a form of follow-up training, adapt the SSI unearned income portion of the April 1999 IVT for on-line training via SSA's Virtual Campus, <http://training.ba.ssa.gov/ot/pages/training/>.

- *Pursuing Direct On-Line Access to State Child Support Enforcement Agency Records Rather Than Through the Federal Case Registry*

Recommendation 7 -- Seek direct on-line access to State child support enforcement (CSE) agency records on child support payments. The Office of Disability and Income Security Programs (ODISP), as the SSA lead component for SSI High-Risk and Information Exchange activities, should discuss with the Department of Health and Human Service's (HHS) Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) the sufficiency of existing laws to permit this type of direct electronic data exchange. If sufficient, then ODISP should request that HHS OCSE issue a guidance letter to the State CSE agencies to provide SSA title XVI CRs with on-line single query access to such records. ODISP should then request Operations to make access to CSE as one of the target agencies in its SASRO project.

However, if existing laws are not sufficient, ODISP should request the Office of Legislative and Congressional Affairs (OLCA) to propose a legislative initiative to address any SSA or OCSE concerns.

Recommendation 8 -- *At a minimum*, if SSA continues to pursue its current legislative proposal for access to the Federal Case Registry of Child Support Orders, the following addendum should be included: States should

be required to provide data on child support collections, receipt, and distribution to the Federal Case Registry.

- **Section III: Highlight of Field Offices' Best Practices That May Be Adapted by Other Field Offices' to Reduce SSI Unearned Income Errors**

Other Payment Accuracy Issues

Several, much broader, payment accuracy issues emerged during our review that went beyond our issue team's mission. These pertain to payment accuracy in general, and not SSI unearned income specifically, e.g., establishing a formal agency-wide SSI policy, addressing quality assurance, revisiting the impact of title II and title XVI concurrent entitlement on payment accuracy, and developing a field office information channel similar to Information Channel 55 at Headquarters.