MEMORANDUM

Date: April 26, 2017

To: The Commissioner

From: Acting Inspector General

Subject: Match of California Death Information Against Social Security Administration Records (A-06-14-24138)

The attached final report presents the results of the Office of Audit’s review. The objective was to determine whether death information on California Department of Public Health Death Statistical Master Files was recorded on Social Security Administration (SSA) records. We also determined the status of six cases from our 2014 audit of Payments to Individuals with Deaths Reported in California from 1980 to 1987 (A-06-14-21416) that were pending Office of Investigations review or SSA verification.

If you wish to discuss the final report, please call me or have your staff contact Rona Lawson, Assistant Inspector General for Audit, 410-965-9700.

Gale Stallworth Stone

Attachment
Objective

To determine whether death information on California Department of Public Health (CDPH) Death Statistical Master Files was recorded on Social Security Administration (SSA) records. We also determined the status of six cases from our 2014 audit of Payments to Individuals with Deaths Reported in California from 1980 to 1987 (A-06-14-21416) that were pending Office of Investigations review or SSA verification.

Background

As part of our 2014 audit, we obtained CDPH data that identified the personally identifiable information (PII) of approximately 1.2 million numberholders recorded as having died in California between 1980 and 1987. We matched the data against SSA records and identified 14 cases where SSA issued approximately $3 million in improper payments to deceased beneficiaries. We also identified about 64,000 non-beneficiary numberholders who were likely deceased but did not have death information on the Numident.

For this review, we purchased CDPH Death Statistical Master Files for the period 1970 through 2004. We matched the data file against SSA payment records and identified beneficiaries in current payment status whose PII matched a deceased individual in the CDPH file.

Findings

Death information on CDPH files was not always recorded on SSA records. At the time of our audit, SSA was issuing benefit payments to 83 individuals whose PII matched that of individuals who died in California from 1970 through 2004.

- In 34 cases, the beneficiaries were deceased. SSA terminated benefits to 28 beneficiaries and identified approximately $4.6 million in improper payments. SSA suspended payments to five beneficiaries but had not quantified the related improper payments. We estimate improper payments in these five cases totaled approximately $1.2 million. The remaining case did not involve improper payments.

- In 43 cases, the beneficiaries were alive. SSA and the Office of Investigations determined that none of the cases involved improper payments to the beneficiaries.

- In six cases, SSA was determining the beneficiaries’ status. The Office of Operations referred the cases to its regional offices for development.

We also identified approximately 188,000 numberholders who were likely deceased but had no death information on the Numident. At the time of our review, none of these numberholders was receiving SSA payments. We provided SSA with the numberholders’ information, and SSA recorded death information on most of these records.

Of the six open cases from our prior review, the Office of Investigations confirmed that four beneficiaries were deceased. SSA terminated the payments and identified $632,001 in improper payments issued after these beneficiaries’ deaths. In the two remaining cases, SSA confirmed the beneficiaries were alive.

Because SSA took prompt action to suspend or terminate benefits and add numberholders’ death information to its records, we made no recommendations for further corrective action.
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**ABBREVIATIONS**

CDPH  California Department of Public Health  
OIG    Office of the Inspector General  
PII    Personally Identifiable Information  
POMS   Program Operations Manual System  
SSA    Social Security Administration  
SSI    Supplemental Security Income  
SSN    Social Security Number  

OBJECTIVE

Our objective was to determine whether death information on California Department of Public Health (CDPH) Death Statistical Master Files was recorded on Social Security Administration (SSA) records. We also determined the status of six cases from our 2014 audit of Payments to Individuals with Deaths Reported in California from 1980 to 1987 (A-06-14-21416)\(^1\) that were pending Office of Investigations review or SSA verification.

BACKGROUND

Section 205(r) of the Social Security Act requires that SSA match States’ death records against SSA payment records to identify and prevent erroneous payments after death.\(^2\) In addition, SSA matches death records from other Federal, State, and local agencies. SSA uses the Death Information Processing System to receive and process death information\(^3\) as well as record dates of death on the Numident file. The Numident is a database that houses personally identifiable information (PII) for each person issued a Social Security number (SSN). SSA uses death information on the Numident to produce a record of death information, known as the Death Master File.

As part of our 2014 audit, we obtained CDPH data that identified the PII of approximately 1.2 million individuals recorded as having died in California between 1980 and 1987. We matched the data against SSA records and identified 14 cases where SSA had issued approximately $3 million in improper payments to deceased beneficiaries.\(^4\) We also identified about 64,000 non-beneficiaries who were likely deceased but did not have death information on the Numident.

For this review, we purchased CDPH Death Statistical Master Files that provide the PII of approximately 7.4 million individuals recorded as having died in California from 1970 through 2004. We matched the data file against SSA payment records and identified beneficiaries in current payment status whose PII matched that of a deceased individual listed in the CDPH file. For more information on our scope and methodology, see Appendix A.

\(^1\) SSA, OIG, Payments to Individuals with Deaths Reported in California from 1980 to 1987 (A-06-14-21416), August 2014.

\(^2\) 42 U.S.C. § 405(r).

\(^3\) SSA, POMS, GN 02602.051A (December 4, 2015).

\(^4\) We use the term “beneficiary” throughout this report in reference to both Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance beneficiaries and/or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients.
RESULTS OF REVIEW

Death information on CDPH files was not always recorded on SSA records. At the time of our audit, SSA was issuing benefit payments to 83 individuals whose PII matched that of individuals recorded as having died in California from 1970 through 2004.5 SSA records indicated that 41 instances likely involved fraud. We referred these cases to our Office of Investigations. The other 42 instances appeared to involve multiple individuals using the same SSN. We referred these cases to SSA. The Office of Investigations and SSA:

- Determined 34 beneficiaries were deceased. SSA terminated benefits to 28 beneficiaries and identified approximately $4.6 million in improper payments. SSA suspended payments in five cases but had not quantified the related improper payments. We estimate improper payments in these five cases totaled approximately $1.2 million. The remaining case did not involve improper payments.

- Determined 43 beneficiaries were alive, and none of the cases involved improper payments to the beneficiaries.

- Had not determined the status of six beneficiaries. The Office of Operations referred the cases to its regional offices for development.

We also identified approximately 188,000 numberholders who were likely deceased but had no death information on the Numident. These numberholders’ PII matched that of a deceased individual in CDPH death records. At the time of our review, none of these numberholders was receiving SSA payments. We provided SSA with numberholder information, and SSA subsequently recorded death information on approximately 161,000 of these records. Resolution

\[\text{Status of 83 Beneficiaries Whose PII Matched Deceased Individuals in California Death Data Files}\]

We provided SSA with numberholder information, and SSA subsequently recorded death information on approximately 161,000 of these records. Resolution

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5 Matching PII included SSN, first and last name, date of birth, and parents’ names.
of these discrepancies reduced SSA’s exposure to future improper payments and improved the
accuracy and completeness of the Death Master File.

When we issued the final report on our 2014 audit, six cases were pending. Since that time, SSA
has determined two beneficiaries were alive, and the Office of Investigations confirmed the other
four beneficiaries were deceased. SSA terminated the payments to the four beneficiaries and
identified $632,001 in improper payments after these beneficiaries’ deaths.

Deceased Beneficiaries

The Office of Investigations and SSA confirmed 34 beneficiaries were deceased.

- SSA terminated payments to 28 beneficiaries and determined it issued $4.6 million in
  improper payments (see Appendix B, Table B–1).
  - A California man died in 1983. In April 1997, California authorities charged the man’s
    brother with assault. In September 1997, the brother failed to appear in court and
    assumed his deceased brother’s identity to avoid prosecution. In 2010, SSA approved a
    disability claim the fugitive filed under his deceased brother’s SSN. In 2012, law
    enforcement captured the fugitive, and, in 2013, a jury convicted and sentenced him to
    life in prison. SSA determined it had issued $51,340 in improper payments before it
    terminated the disability payments in October 2015.
  - A California widow who received survivor’s benefits died in 2002. From 2002 until SSA
    terminated benefit payments in June 2016, the deceased woman’s daughter stole
    $84,822 in benefits deposited into her mother’s account. Investigators also determined
    the daughter received $177,646 in low-income housing benefits to which she was not
    entitled. The daughter pleaded guilty to theft of government funds. In December 2016,
    she was sentenced to 5 years’ probation and ordered to make restitution.
  - An SSI recipient died in October 1995. In 1996, someone claiming to be the decedent
    filed a widow’s benefit claim using her SSN. SSA determined it issued $238,434 in
    improper SSI payments and survivor’s benefits before it terminated the payments in
    September 2015. The deceased woman’s daughter admitted to stealing the funds from
    her mother’s bank account but denied applying for widow’s benefits. The
    U.S. Attorney’s Office declined prosecution due in part to the daughter’s age and poor
    health.
  - A California man died in 1973. Events indicated his half-brother assumed his identity
    and applied for disability benefits in 1991. Investigators determined the half-brother died
    in July 2009. SSA issued $293,970 in improper payments before it terminated the
    benefits in September 2015. At the time of our review, SSA was working with the
    Department of the Treasury to reclaim funds remaining in the half-brother’s account.

- SSA suspended benefit payments to five beneficiaries but had not quantified the related
  improper payments. We estimate improper payments in these cases totaled approximately
  $1.2 million (see Appendix B, Table B–2).
In one case, SSA confirmed the numberholder was deceased and recorded the death information in its records. SSA determined the case did not involve improper payments. Improper payments occurred in 33 of 34 cases because the numberholders’ death information did not appear in SSA records. As a result, SSA did not terminate benefit payments when the numberholders died and approved benefit claims identity thieves filed after the numberholders’ deaths.

Living Beneficiaries

SSA and the Office of Investigations determined 43 beneficiaries were alive. SSA confirmed the beneficiaries were the actual numberholders, and none of the cases involved improper payments to the beneficiaries.

In 18 cases, the State of California incorporated incorrect SSNs on the decedents’ death certificates. SSA identified the decedents’ correct SSNs and added corresponding death information to the numberholders’ records.

The remaining cases appeared to involve multiple individuals using the SSNs. To illustrate, in eight cases, available documents indicated the State of California generated death certificates after identity thieves using these SSNs died in California. Before their deaths, the identity thieves received SSI payments under the assumed identities. SSA terminated these payments upon notification of death. Years later, the actual numberholders filed for, and began receiving, SSA benefits. SSA officials stated the Office of Systems was removing the identity thieves’ information from the current beneficiaries’ records.

Deceased Non-beneficiary Numberholders

We identified approximately 188,000 additional numberholders who were likely deceased but had no death information on the Numident. At the time of our review, none of these numberholders was receiving benefits. In January 2016, we provided SSA with a data file that identified these numberholders. SSA informed us in March 2016 that it had added death information to the Numident records of more than 17,000 numberholders who previously received payments that SSA had terminated because of death.6

SSA’s Office of Business Improvement conducted a comprehensive analysis of the remaining records. After SSA’s independent review, it added death information to the Numident records of approximately 144,000 additional numberholders. Because of concerns with the precision of the PII match on the remaining 27,000 records, and to avoid the possibility of erroneously adding death information to living individuals’ records, SSA decided not to add death information to these Numident records. We commend SSA for its prompt action.

6 SSA input death information on these records in response to recommendations made in our prior audits Title II Deceased Beneficiaries Who Do Not Have Death Information on the Numident (A-09-11-21171), July 2012, and Title XVI Deceased Recipients Who Do Not Have Death Information on the Numident (A-09-12-22132), May 2013.
Status of Six Open Cases from Our 2014 Audit

When we issued our final report in 2014, investigations were in progress for four cases. In addition, SSA had agreed to determine whether two other beneficiaries were the correct numberholders and take additional actions, as appropriate.

- The Office of Investigations confirmed all four beneficiaries were deceased. SSA terminated the payments and determined it issued $632,001 in improper payments after these beneficiaries’ deaths.

Table 1: Status of Four Prior Audit Cases with Investigations in Progress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Payment Status</th>
<th>Improper Payment Amount</th>
<th>Investigation Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Terminated October 2014</td>
<td>$227,755</td>
<td>Prosecution Declined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Terminated September 2014</td>
<td>130,003</td>
<td>Guilty Plea-Sentenced to Probation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Terminated May 2016</td>
<td>79,343</td>
<td>Criminal Case Referred to U.S. Attorney’s Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Terminated October 2016</td>
<td>194,900</td>
<td>Criminal Case Pending</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- SSA verified two beneficiaries were alive. In November 2014, SSA removed an identity thief’s earnings from one record, established a $5,908 overpayment on the beneficiary’s payment record, and reduced the beneficiary’s monthly benefit amount by $114.

CONCLUSIONS

Death information on CDPH files was not always recorded on SSA records. Because the death information did not appear in Agency records for the cases we identified, SSA did not terminate benefit payments when the numberholders died and approved claims identity thieves filed using the deceased numberholders’ PII. As a result, SSA issued approximately $5.8 million in improper payments to 33 beneficiaries who died in California from 1970 through 2004. We also identified approximately 188,000 numberholders who were likely deceased but had no death information on the Numident. At the time of our review, none of these numberholders was receiving SSA payments. During the audit, SSA added death information to most of these numberholders’ records.

Of the six open cases from our 2014 audit, SSA determined that two beneficiaries were alive, and the Office of Investigations determined that four beneficiaries were deceased. SSA terminated the payments and identified $632,001 in improper payments after these beneficiaries’ deaths.

Because SSA took prompt action to suspend or terminate benefits and add numberholders’ death information to its records, we made no recommendations for further corrective action.
AGENCY COMMENTS

SSA appreciated acknowledgement of its prompt corrective action and had no further comments. The full text of SSA’s comments is included in Appendix C.

[Signature]
Kerry A. Byrd
for

Rona Lawson
Assistant Inspector General for Audit
APPENDICES
Appendix A – Scope and Methodology

To accomplish our objective, we:

- Reviewed Federal laws and regulations related to death matches with State agencies.
- Reviewed the Social Security Administration’s (SSA) policies and procedures.
- Obtained a California Department of Public Health (CDPH) death data file of approximately 7.4 million individuals recorded as having died in California from January 1, 1970 through December 31, 2004.
- Identified 187,976 numberholders who had no death entry on the Numident and whose Social Security number (SSN), name, and/or date of birth (within a 2-year variance) matched deceased individuals listed in the CDPH death data file.
- Identified 138 Old-Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance beneficiaries and/or Supplemental Security Income recipients in current payment status as of November 2014 whose SSN, first and last names, and date of birth matched individuals listed as deceased in the CDPH death data file. We obtained death certificates from CDPH for each of the 138 individuals.
- Reviewed the Master Beneficiary and Supplemental Security Records, the Detailed Earnings Query, Lexis-Nexis, and the Numident for the 138 identified records. Based on review of these cases, we:
  - Determined 55 of the 138 individuals in current pay status were not the same individuals who died in California from 1970 through 2004.
  - In 27 instances, CDPH data included discrepancies in such additional identifiers as place of birth and parents’ names.
  - In 19 instances, California provided the wrong SSN on the death certificate, and we identified an alternate SSN for the decedent.
  - In nine instances, SSA had already determined the death information was erroneous and corrected the Numident record and/or removed earnings that did not belong to the numberholder.
  - Referred 41 cases to our Office of Investigations for fraud development.
  - Referred the remaining 42 cases to SSA for review.
- Quantified potential improper payments after death.
We conducted our audit from October 2015 to February 2017 at SSA’s Regional Office in Dallas, Texas. We determined the data used for this audit were sufficiently reliable to meet our audit objective. The primary entity audited was the Office of the Deputy Commissioner for Operations. We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We believe the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective.
## Appendix B – SUMMARY OF IMPROPER PAYMENTS

### Table B–1: Improper Payments to Deceased Beneficiaries—the Social Security Administration Terminated Payments and Computed Improper Payment Amounts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Entitlement Date</th>
<th>Date of Death</th>
<th>Improper Payment</th>
<th>Case Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>June 1991</td>
<td>December 1973</td>
<td>$293,970</td>
<td>Closed – suspect deceased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>May 1982</td>
<td>January 2003</td>
<td>71,475</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>May 2006</td>
<td>October 1990</td>
<td>113,239</td>
<td>Closed - prosecution declined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>January 1998</td>
<td>February 2001</td>
<td>164,611</td>
<td>Closed with partial reclamation from bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>May 2004</td>
<td>April 2004</td>
<td>225,056</td>
<td>Closed - prosecution declined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>December 1977</td>
<td>October 2001</td>
<td>172,749</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>March 1992</td>
<td>June 1999</td>
<td>185,523</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>December 1992</td>
<td>February 2002</td>
<td>177,926</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>July 1996</td>
<td>October 1995</td>
<td>238,434</td>
<td>Closed - prosecution declined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>April 2010</td>
<td>July 1983</td>
<td>51,340</td>
<td>Identify thief in prison serving life sentence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>May 2004</td>
<td>December 1973</td>
<td>125,353</td>
<td>Closed - prosecution declined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>July 1997</td>
<td>May 1974</td>
<td>133,752</td>
<td>Identity theft pled guilty-sentenced to 60 days in custody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>January 1999</td>
<td>November 2001</td>
<td>194,920</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>March 1995</td>
<td>June 2001</td>
<td>215,760</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>July 1992</td>
<td>December 2001</td>
<td>126,068</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>December 1970</td>
<td>August 2001</td>
<td>147,359</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>January 1995</td>
<td>June 1990</td>
<td>175,962</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>October 2012</td>
<td>November 1994</td>
<td>29,850</td>
<td>Illegal alien/identity thief was indicted and in custody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>May 1997</td>
<td>January 2001</td>
<td>186,939</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>February 1976</td>
<td>May 2002</td>
<td>84,822</td>
<td>Daughter pled guilty to Theft of Government Funds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>December 1991</td>
<td>October 2001</td>
<td>88,245</td>
<td>Investigation closed—referred to SSA for reclamation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>May 2000</td>
<td>April 1979</td>
<td>168,095</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>January 2010</td>
<td>November 1977</td>
<td>54,183</td>
<td>Closed - prosecution declined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>August 2012</td>
<td>February 1974</td>
<td>28,653</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>June 2004</td>
<td>September 2004</td>
<td>143,131</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>October 1991</td>
<td>June 1994</td>
<td>396,424</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>March 1976</td>
<td>May 1993</td>
<td>289,484</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>May 1995</td>
<td>February 2000</td>
<td>298,845</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total $4,582,168
Table B–2: Estimated Improper Payments to Deceased Beneficiaries—the Social Security Administration Suspended Payments but Had Not Computed Improper Payment Amounts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Entitlement Date</th>
<th>Date of Death</th>
<th>Payment Suspension Date</th>
<th>Estimated Improper Payments</th>
<th>Case Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>March 1993</td>
<td>April 1995</td>
<td>June 2015</td>
<td>$300,344</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>September 2009</td>
<td>December 1977</td>
<td>November 2015</td>
<td>86,965</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>October 1993</td>
<td>April 1993</td>
<td>January 2016</td>
<td>396,189</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>December 1979</td>
<td>December 2003</td>
<td>March 2016</td>
<td>157,161</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>April 1999</td>
<td>May 2001</td>
<td>February 2017</td>
<td>258,685</td>
<td>Investigation on-going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong> $1,199,344</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table B–3: Questioned Costs—Improper Payments Computed by the Social Security Administration and Estimated Improper Payments in Suspended Payment Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improper Payments—Benefits Terminated (Table B-1)</td>
<td>$4,582,168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated Improper Payments—Benefits Suspended (Table B-2)</td>
<td>1,199,344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$5,781,512</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
MEMORANDUM

Date: April 12, 2017

To: Gale Stallworth Stone
    Acting Inspector General

From: Stephanie Hall /s/
    Acting Deputy Chief of Staff


Thank you for the opportunity to review the draft report. We appreciate OIG’s acknowledgement that we took prompt corrective action to address the findings identified during the course of the audit. We have no further comments.

Please let me know if we can be of further assistance. You may direct staff inquiries to Gary S. Hatcher at (410) 965-0680.
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- Telephone: 1-800-269-0271 from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time
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