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SOCIAL SECURITY

Refer to:
S9H: AB9988

August 25, 2009

This is in response to your December 26, 2008, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for two audit reports completed by the Social Security Administration's Office of Inspector General: A-13-97-81021, National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Office of Inspector General Peer Review, and A-08-97-44001, Assessment of the Social Security Administration's Processing of Requests for Social Security Numbers in Emergency Situations.

In considering your request under the FOIA, we located Report A-13-97-81021, consisting of 13 pages that I can release in full. We also located Report A-08-97-44001, consisting of 31 pages. I have, however, withheld 12 pages in part and three pages in full under FOIA exemption 2 (5 U.S.C. 552 (b)(2)). This exemption protects internal agency practices. I withheld another page in part under FOIA exemption 6 (5 U.S.C. 552 (b)(6)), which protects personal privacy. I am releasing the remaining 18 pages in full.

If you disagree with our response you may file an administrative appeal. Mail your appeal within 30 days after you receive this letter to the Executive Director, Office of Privacy and Disclosure, Social Security Administration, 6401 Security Boulevard, Baltimore, Maryland 21235. Mark the envelope "Freedom of Information Act Appeal."

Sincerely,

Dawn S. Wiggins
Freedom of Information Officer

Enclosure



SOCIAL SECURITY
Office of the Inspector General

MEMORANDUM

Date: JUN 30 1998

Refer To:

To: Kenneth S. Apfel
Commissioner of Social Security

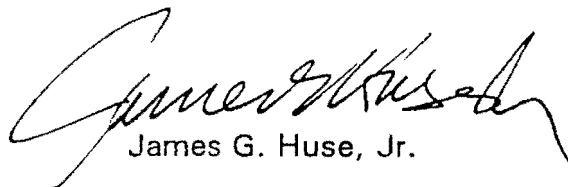
From: Acting Inspector General

Subject: Assessment of the Social Security Administration's Processing of Requests for
Social Security Numbers in Emergency Situations

The attached final report presents the results of our review of the Social Security Administration's (SSA) emergency Social Security numbers (SSN) procedures (A-08-97-44001). The objective of our review was to assess SSA's controls over processing SSNs using its emergency procedures.

This report contains information that is sensitive and confidential. For security reasons, we recommend that distribution for this report be limited to those with a need to know.

You may wish to comment on any further action taken or contemplated on our recommendations. If you choose to offer comments, please provide your comments within the next 60 days. If you wish to discuss the final report, please call me or have your staff contact Pamela J. Gardiner, Assistant Inspector General for Audit, at (410) 965-9700.



James G. Huse, Jr.

Attachment

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this audit was to assess the Social Security Administration's (SSA) controls over processing Social Security numbers (SSN) in emergency situations.

BACKGROUND

Enumeration is the process by which SSA assigns SSNs to identify workers and beneficiaries and issues replacement cards to people with existing numbers. Two SSA customer service goals, with respect to enumeration, are the prompt and accurate issuance of SSNs. Modernization of SSA's systems has dramatically improved processing times and helped SSA meet its customer service goals.¹ SSA assigns about 6 million SSNs and issues about 10 million replacement cards each year.

SSA's 1,300 field offices (FO) nationwide are the primary contact point for receipt of SSN applications because of the Agency's need to examine documents establishing identity. FO employees normally use the on-line Modernized Enumeration System (MES) to process SSN requests. FOs are sometimes unable to complete requests for SSN cards at the first point of contact. In order to provide prompt service, SSA uses a manual emergency process to obtain SSNs within hours of the request. A small number of SSN requests, about 300 to 400 annually, are processed in this manner.

SSA management expressed concern that the emergency SSN process, which helps the Agency meet its timeliness goals, may not result in SSNs being issued accurately. Management viewed the emergency process as susceptible to fraudulent requests due to: 1) the rapid processing associated with these requests and 2) the lack of adequate controls to ensure all evidentiary requirements have been met before SSNs are assigned. In response to SSA's concerns, we conducted an audit of the adequacy of overall controls and the necessity for the emergency process.

When delays in processing SSN requests become acute, FOs can initiate requests for SSNs through the emergency process. FOs, with regional office (RO) concurrence, can obtain SSNs from the Office of Central Records Operations (OCRO) within hours of the request.

¹ SSA General Business Plan, Fiscal Years 1996-1999, page 43.

SSA Headquarters components use this process in several specialized cases. In harassment/abuse cases, FOs interface directly with SSA Headquarters' Office of Program Benefits and Policy (OPBP),² forwarding all case documentation to OPBP for review, processing, and assignment of SSNs. Use of the emergency process in harassment/abuse cases was designed to protect individuals' identities. Until 1997, SSA's policy required that SSNs obtained in harassment/abuse and endangerment cases not be cross-referenced to previous SSNs. OPBP also uses this process for problem cases such as adoption and religious objection cases referred by FOs for resolution.

The emergency process may also be used by the Office of Disability and International Operations (ODIO) for confidential requests for SSNs from law enforcement and other Federal agencies. However, ODIO currently uses SSA's automated systems to assign SSNs and seldom uses the emergency process. Finally, the Office of System Requirements (OSR) occasionally provides SSNs at the request of SSA management and/or Members of Congress.

We reviewed SSA's procedures and practices for requesting, approving, and processing SSNs in emergency situations. To evaluate controls, we reviewed a random sample of 50 applications from the 711 emergency SSNs issued during the period October 1994 through September 1996. We conducted our audit work at SSA Headquarters and OCRO in Baltimore, Maryland; the Southeastern Program Service Center in Birmingham, Alabama; SSA's RO in San Francisco, California; and FOs in the San Francisco Bay area. Field work was performed between January 1997 and September 1997.

RESULTS OF REVIEW

Controls in the overall emergency process need to be strengthened to ensure that established procedures are followed. In response to a 1993 audit³ conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Inspector General (HHS/OIG) of OCRO's operations, SSA improved controls over the issuance and accountability for emergency SSNs within OCRO. However, the overall emergency process does not assure the accurate issuance of SSNs.

Seven of 50 cases in our sample, or 14 percent, did not have documentation to show that SSA personnel had followed established procedures. [

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² Effective June 1997, responsibility for assignment of SSNs in harassment/abuse/life endangerment cases was transferred to the integrity staff within the Office of Disability and International Operations.

³ Report entitled, *Audit of the Office of Central Records Operations' Social Security Number Records Correction Process* (A-13-92-00237), issued in June 1993.

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Due to increased efficiencies in existing automated systems and SSA policy changes regarding the cross-referencing of SSNs, the emergency process is no longer needed. With improvements in MES, FOs can now assign SSNs within 1 working day. For cases that must be sent to Headquarters, FOs can follow up on delayed actions or obtain status updates using OCRO's automated tracking system, the Earnings Inquiry and Control System (EICS), implemented in 1993. Improvements in automated processing and tracking of SSN requests make the emergency process unnecessary in FOs.

For harassment/abuse cases, the emergency process was used to maintain the confidentiality of the applicant. In 1997, SSA rescinded its requirement that new SSNs issued in harassment/abuse and endangerment cases not be cross-referenced. Also, confidential SSN requests from law enforcement and other agencies can be processed using automated procedures.

SSA identified some additional types of cases that are processed infrequently using emergency SSN procedures. We determined these cases can also be processed through SSA's automated systems without delays or compromising service to the public.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The risk of employees improperly issuing SSNs using the emergency process continues to exist because of the rapid, manual nature of the process. Because of increased efficiencies in existing automated systems and SSA policy changes regarding the cross-referencing of SSNs, this emergency process is no longer necessary. SSA has other, more secure, automated processing alternatives that can be used by FO and Headquarters components to serve its customers in a timely and accurate manner. Considering the continued risk and limited benefit to SSA in view of enhanced automated systems, we found no compelling reason to continue the emergency SSN process.

We recommend that SSA discontinue use of the current emergency SSN process; and in the future, process all SSN applications through SSA's automated systems. In addition, as long as the emergency process remains operational, we are recommending several enhancements to strengthen internal controls over the process.

AGENCY COMMENTS

SSA agreed that the majority of emergency SSN requests could be handled through SSA's improved automated systems, increasing the accuracy of SSNs issued and strengthening internal controls. Effective immediately, SSA will restrict use of the emergency SSN process to: 1) certain religious objection cases where FOs are unable to accommodate the client using the automated process and 2) requests by SSA management and/or Members of Congress involving dire emergencies. SSA estimates these two categories represent fewer than a dozen requests each year.

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Finally, SSA noted that administrative messages to FOs will not be necessary, since use of the emergency SSN process will be restricted to conditions not emanating from Ros (e.g., OCRO will be processing all emergency SSNs in the future).

OIG RESPONSE

Although we continue to believe that SSA can accommodate all emergency situations within its automated systems, we commend the Agency for taking immediate action to severely restrict use of the emergency SSN process, reducing usage by about 98 percent. SSA's action has rendered our recommendation concerning administrative messages to FOs as academic.

While the Office of the Inspector (OIG) acknowledges the infrequent use of the emergency SSN process anticipated by the Agency, we find it appropriate to recommend that management monitor usage under the restricted conditions to ensure that the nature and volume of requests remain within the limited parameters identified by the Agency. The monitoring process would further ensure that all SSNs issued through the emergency process are supported by proper documentation.

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INTRODUCTION

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this audit was to assess SSA's controls over processing SSNs in emergency situations.

BACKGROUND

Enumeration is the process by which SSA assigns SSNs to identify workers and beneficiaries and issues replacement cards to people with existing numbers. To obtain an SSN, individuals must apply to SSA and provide satisfactory evidence of age, identity, and U.S. citizenship or legal alien status. Two SSA customer service goals, with respect to enumeration, are the prompt and accurate issuance of SSNs. Modernization of the Agency's systems has dramatically improved processing times and helped SSA meet its customer service goals. SSA assigns about 6 million original/new⁴ SSNs and issues about 10 million replacement cards each year.

SSA's 1,300 FOs nationwide are the primary contact point for receipt of SSN applications because of the Agency's need to examine documents establishing identity. FO employees normally use the on-line MES to process SSN requests. However, FOs are sometimes unable to completely handle requests for SSN cards at the first point of contact as applicants prefer. In order to provide prompt service, SSA uses a manual emergency process to obtain original or new SSNs within hours of the request. A small number of SSN requests, about 300 to 400 annually, are processed using this emergency procedure.

Processing SSN Applications Using Automated Systems

The 6 million applications for original/new SSNs processed each year originate from two sources: FOs and hospitals.

FOs accept about 3 million SSN applications each year using MES. [redacted]

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Though individuals are generally assigned only one SSN, under special circumstances, such as abandonment/abuse, SSA will assign a new SSN. The evidence requirements for original and new SSNs are the same.

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Hospital participation in the automated Enumeration at Birth (EAB) procedure, implemented in 1988, now accounts for about half the SSNs issued each year. With parental approval, the birth certificate application can serve as the application for an SSN. Hospitals send the birth data to State Bureaus of Vital Statistics which format and electronically transmit the SSN application to SSA's National Computer Center (NCC). The EAB process, extended to all 50 States in 1995, now provides SSN cards generally within a month.

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SSA Policy for Using Emergency Procedures

SSA's Program Operations Manual (POMS), section RM 00204.305B, states that the emergency SSN procedure can be used for obtaining an SSN assignment if needed faster than provided by MES. While SSA's policy does not set forth any underlying justification for use of the emergency process, SSA has long recognized customer satisfaction as sufficient reason. In addition, SSA extended use of the emergency process to ODIO which handles harassment/abuse and endangerment cases,⁷ as well as confidential requests from law enforcement and other Federal agencies. These cases require SSNs that cannot be traced to prior SSNs, thereby protecting the privacy of applicants. The emergency process provides a means of accomplishing this.

_____ The Numident master file contains identifying information (e.g., name, date of birth, mother's name, etc.) for each number holder.

[REDACTED]

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Prior to June 1997, responsibility for assignment of SSNs in harassment/abuse/life endangerment cases belonged to OPBP.

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Procedures for Issuing Emergency SSNs

OCRO issues and accounts for all emergency SSNs and maintains a record of the numbers assigned on a manually prepared emergency SSN log. The log reflects the requesting component, reason for the request, and OCRO personnel issuing the

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When delays in processing SSN requests through the automated systems become acute, FOs can initiate requests for emergency SSNs. FOs must contact designated RO personnel. Since the emergency process supplants the action already sent to OCRO, FOs must either retrieve the original SSN application from OCRO or have the individual prepare another Form SS-5. Use of ROs also limits the number of employees contacting OCRO. After concurrence, ROs contact OCRO to issue the emergency SSN. OCRO provides the emergency SSN to the requesting RO which in turn notifies the FO, completing the entire process by telephone within hours. OCRO uses the RSPEC procedure within FALCON to enter applicant data to update the Numident.

Original SSN applications, once secured, remain in FOs during emergency processing. After FO verification that the emergency SSN has been posted to the Numident master file, MES is annotated with a replacement card entry, but issuance of the SSN card is suppressed. The MES entry assigns a control number to this action, and the original Form SS-5 is forwarded to the Federal Records Center (FRC) for microfilming.

FOs are required to send all documentation developed in harassment/abuse and life endangerment situations to the ODIO integrity staff within Headquarters for processing. Until April 1997, SSA policy required that new SSNs assigned in these cases be nontraceable to the applicant's original SSN. The manual emergency process ensured compliance with SSA's policy. In 1997, SSA reversed its long-standing policy prohibiting the cross-referencing of SSNs, because the Agency considered information in its automated systems secure.

Confidential SSN requests from law enforcement and other Federal agencies, also handled within ODIO, continue to require nontraceable SSNs; although ODIO uses SSA's automated systems to effectively process requests. After SSN assignment for harassment/abuse and law enforcement requests, ODIO forwards the original applications to FRC for microfilming.

There are several infrequent users of the emergency SSN process within Headquarters. OPBP reviews cases with problems related to adoption⁹ and religious objection¹⁰ received from FOs. If approved, requests are sent to OCRO for assignment of the emergency SSN. OCRO makes any necessary corrections to the

⁹ FOs are required to process requests from adoptive parents for new SSNs as original SSNs. If FOs process the requests incorrectly, either as a replacement card or new SSN, then OCRO must be contacted to correct the error and obtain a non-cross referenced number.

¹⁰ FOs can approve the assignment of a new SSN when the basis for the applicant's request is religious or cultural objection to the digits in his/her SSN. However, if the FO expects, based on the area and/or group number in the SSNs currently being issued, that the new SSN is likely to contain the objectionable digits, the case is forwarded to OCRO for assignment of the new SSN.

Numident master file and completes processing through RSPEC. The OSR also uses the emergency process to provide same day delivery for special requests from SSA management and Members of Congress.

Volume of Emergency SSNs

During Fiscal Years (FY) 1995 and 1996, SSA issued 409 and 302 emergency SSNs, respectively. Appendix A provides a detailed schedule of the number of emergency SSNs issued by requesting component. The largest user of the emergency process was the Headquarters component OPBP. San Francisco was the largest RO user of the process, while two regions, Seattle and Kansas City, did not request any emergency SSNs in FYs 1995 or 1996.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of our review was to assess SSA's controls over SSNs in emergency situations.

To achieve our objective, we:

- reviewed SSA's procedures for requesting, approving, and processing SSNs in emergency situations;
- determined the volume of emergency SSNs issued by requesting components from the emergency log maintained by OCRO;
- followed up on previous HHS/OIG report findings regarding the emergency SSN process within OCRO;
- reviewed reports on the quality of the enumeration process by the Office of Program and Integrity Reviews;
- reviewed a random sample of 50 emergency SSNs from the 711 emergency SSNs issued during the period October 1994 through September 1996;
- obtained verification of birth certificates from the State Bureaus of Vital Statistics and records maintained by OPBP for the cases in our sample;
- analyzed earnings posted to the SSNs for 7 error cases and 11 judgmentally selected cases in our sample; and
- visited the San Francisco RO; and three FOs in the immediate San Francisco Bay area to observe procedures followed and review emergency SSN cases processed during the audit period.

We reviewed the internal controls necessary to meet our objectives. Audit work was conducted at SSA Headquarters and OCRO in Baltimore, Maryland; the Southeastern Program Service Center in Birmingham, Alabama; the SSA RO in San Francisco, California; and three FOs in the immediate area. We focused on the San Francisco area because of the relatively large number of emergency SSNs requested. Field work was performed between January 1997 and September 1997. Our audit was performed in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

RESULTS OF REVIEW

CONTROLS IN THE EMERGENCY SSN PROCESS NEED TO BE IMPROVED

Controls in the overall emergency process need to be strengthened to ensure that established procedures are followed. In response to a 1993 audit conducted by HHS/OIG of OCRO's operations, SSA made a number of improvements that strengthened controls over the issuance and accountability for emergency SSNs within OCRO. While we recognize SSA's efforts, we believe that further action could be taken in the overall emergency process to assure the accurate issuance of SSNs.

SSA Has Improved Controls over the Emergency Process within OCRO

In response to HHS/OIG's 1993 report, SSA took the following corrective action:

- Provided training for OCRO employees to ensure compliance with written emergency SSN procedures.
- Separated key duties in the emergency process between supervisors and clerks. Supervisors now confirm telephone requests received by clerks from RO personnel, record SSN issuances in the emergency log, and review clerks' actions.
- Began to record issued SSNs on the log for blank SSN cards and annotate SSN card serial numbers in the emergency SSN log, providing improved accountability and an audit trail for blank SSN cards. Supervisors also began to initial the blank SSN log to account for the cards used by clerks. As an additional security measure, only supervisors have access to the blank SSN cards maintained in OCRO's safe.

These actions have corrected the internal control weaknesses reported by HHS/OIG with respect to the emergency process within OCRO. However, the overall emergency process encompasses a number of SSA components; the FOs, ROs, and

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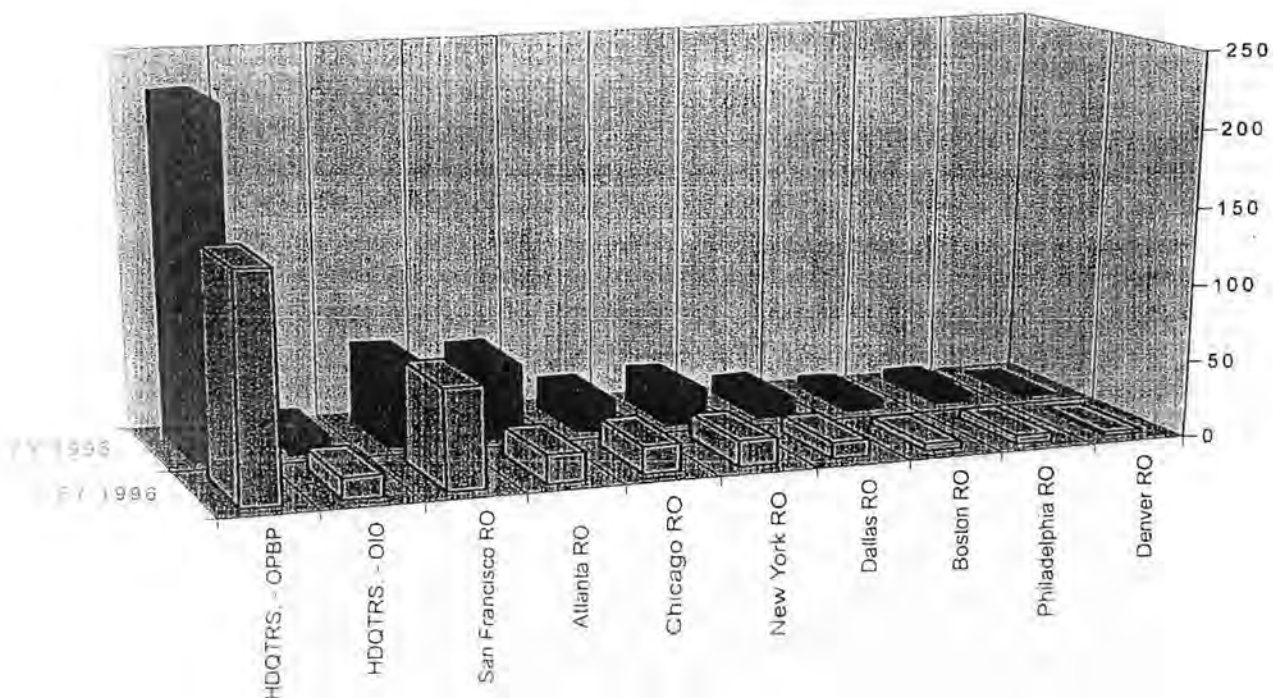
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EMERGENCY SSN PROCESS IS NO LONGER NEEDED

Due to increased efficiencies in existing automated systems and SSA policy changes regarding the cross-referencing of SSNs, the emergency process is no longer necessary and should be discontinued.

During FYs 1995 and 1996, SSA issued a total of 409 and 302 emergency SSNs, respectively. Figure 2 below illustrates the relative volume of emergency SSNs requested by components, as well as the changes in use from FY 1995 to FY 1996.

Figure 2. Emergency SSNs Requested by Component and FY



As Figure 2 illustrates, OPBP was the largest user of the emergency SSN process, while the Office of International Operations' use was nominal. San Francisco was the largest RO user of the emergency SSN process in both FYs. While the trend has been decreasing, San Francisco's volume increased 25 percent from FY 1995 to 1996. The Atlanta RO experienced a significant 63 percent decline during the same period. Appendix A provides a detailed schedule of the number of emergency SSNs issued by requesting component.

Headquarters

Headquarters components' major use of the emergency processing of confidential requests and harassment/abuse cases can now be accomplished under SSA's revised policy using existing automated systems.

ODIO's current use of the RFORCE process has proven sufficient for processing all confidential SSN requests from law enforcement agencies. In 1996, ODIO obtained a nominal 14 emergency SSNs from OCRO. Personnel within ODIO stated they could process all confidential requests using the RFORCE process, thereby eliminating the need for the emergency process.

ODIO could also use the RFORCE process for harassment/abuse cases. SSA's confidence in the security of its automated systems resulted in an April 1997 policy change allowing SSNs in harassment/abuse and endangerment cases to be cross-referenced. Since the FALCON system has the capability to cross-reference both systems-generated SSNs using RFORCE and manually issued SSNs under RSPEC, SSA should use the automated RFORCE process.

SSA identified some additional minor uses of the emergency SSN process: adoption, religious objection, and special request cases. We determined these cases can also be processed through SSA's automated systems without delays or compromising service to the public.

OPBP could use the RFORCE process for adoption and religious objection cases sent by FOs for resolution. OPBP obtains a nominal five emergency SSNs annually for each category. Adoption cases have been handled through the emergency process as a matter of policy. Since the RFORCE process also allows for the non-cross referencing of SSNs, it can be used in these cases. Religious objection cases have been handled through the emergency process in order to obtain an SSN acceptable to the applicant, i.e., without objectionable digits. The RFORCE process automatically generates sequential numbers, making the likelihood of recurring objectionable numbers remote. Considering the low volume of adoption and religious objection cases, use of the RFORCE process will not adversely affect OPBP's resolution of these problem cases.

OSR occasionally provides SSNs at the request of SSA management and/or Members of Congress. OSR requests for emergency SSNs are rare, about 1 request every 2 years. While the emergency process can provide an SSN the same day, the RFORCE process can satisfy these special requests as quickly as the following day.

FOs

Some FOs use the emergency process while others find SSA's automated procedures satisfactory for processing all SSN requests.

San Francisco RO personnel attributed their high use to the commonality of names in that area due to ethnic and/or religious factors. Common names can cause problems in the issuance of unique SSNs to these individuals through MES and can result in SSA crediting earnings to the wrong account. Emergency requests from the Atlanta RO, the second largest RO user, declined significantly from 12 percent in 1995, to 6 percent in 1996, but personnel were unable to explain the reason for the decrease.

Seattle and Kansas City ROs, which did not use the emergency SSN procedure during FYs 1995 and 1996, found SSA's automated procedures satisfactory for processing all SSN requests. Seattle RO personnel stated that while their geographic area had a significant number of ethnic and religious groups, it had not caused any problems in the processing of applications through SSA's automated systems. Use of automated processing should be adopted by all regions.

With improvements in MES, FOs can now assign SSNs within 1 working day. For cases that must be sent to Headquarters, FOs can follow up on delayed actions or obtain status updates using OCRO's automated tracking system, the EICS, available since 1993. Improvements in the automated processing and tracking of SSN requests make the emergency process unnecessary in FOs.

Discontinue the Emergency Process

SSA can meet its customer service goals of prompt and accurate issuance of SSNs using SSA's existing automated systems.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The risk of employees improperly issuing SSNs using the emergency process continues to exist because of the rapid, manual nature of the process. Because of increased efficiencies in existing automated systems and SSA policy changes regarding the cross-referencing of SSNs, the emergency process is no longer necessary. SSA has other, more secure automated processing alternatives that can be used by FO and Headquarters components in a timely and accurate manner. Considering the continued risk and limited benefit to SSA in view of strengthened automated systems, we found no compelling reason to continue the emergency SSN process.

Therefore, we recommend that SSA:

1. Discontinue use of the current emergency SSN process; and in the future, process SSN applications through SSA's automated systems.

As long as the emergency process remains operational, SSA should take the following actions to strengthen internal controls:



AGENCY COMMENTS

SSA agreed that the majority of emergency SSN requests could be handled through SSA's improved automated systems, increasing the accuracy of SSNs issued and strengthening internal controls. Effective immediately, SSA will restrict use of the emergency SSN process to: 1) certain religious objection cases where FOs are unable to accommodate the client using the automated process and 2) requests by SSA management and/or Members of Congress involving dire emergencies. SSA estimates these two categories represent fewer than a dozen requests each year.

Beginning immediately, we will restrict use of the emergency SSN process to certain religious objection cases where the field office is unable to accommodate the client using the automated process and to requests made by SSA management and/or members of Congress involving dire emergencies. These two categories account for a minute number of requested emergency SSNs annually (we estimate less than a dozen per year). The reason for continuing the manual process for certain religious objection cases is that the objectionable numbers may fall within the first five digits of the SSN preassigned to the geographical location of a particular FO. To obtain an SSN outside of the geographical area that does not contain an objectionable number, FO personnel would have to bypass the automated process.

Regarding requests from SSA management and/or members of Congress, these situations are usually of such a dire nature that time is extremely critical. Consequently, using the manual emergency SSN process is the only way to meet the need.

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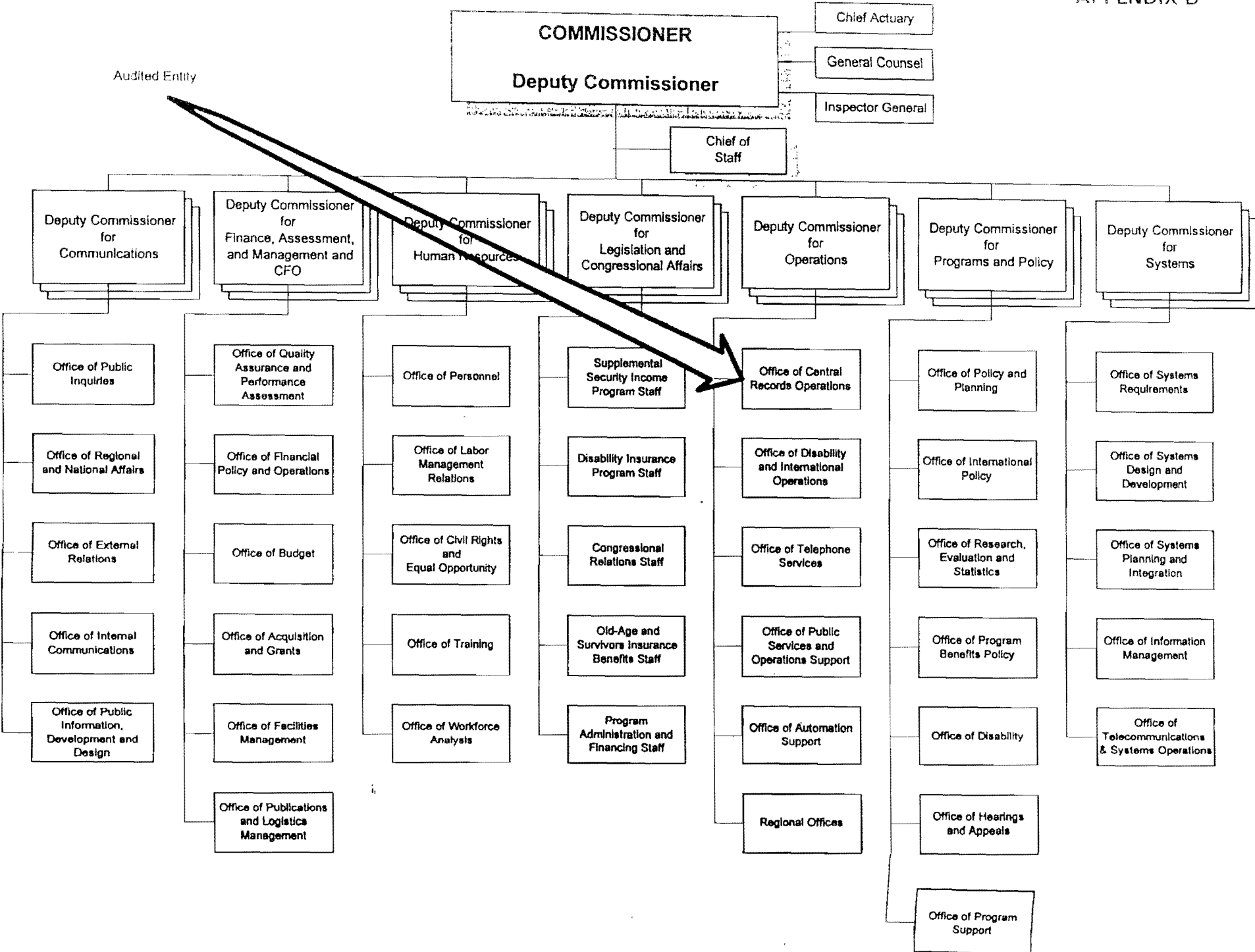
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SSA ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

Social Security Administration

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