

# **Strengthening Protections for Social Security Beneficiaries Act of 2018**

## **Section 103(b) – Report on Results of Study**

### **Introduction**

The *Strengthening Protections for Social Security Beneficiaries Act of 2018* (PL 115-165), or SPSSBA, amends titles II, VIII, and XVI of the Social Security Act to improve and strengthen the Representative Payee Program. Section 103(b) of the SPSSBA requires the Social Security Administration (SSA) to study and test the administrative feasibility of improving information sharing, in partnership with state agencies that provide Adult Protective Services (APS), with respect to:

- A. The assessment of an individual's need for a representative payee (payee) in connection with benefits to which the individual is entitled under title II or title XVI of the Social Security Act; and
- B. Oversight of individuals and organizations serving as payees.

Section 103(b) also requires us to submit a report on the results of this study to the Senate Committee on Finance and the House Committee on Ways and Means.

### **Background**

Social Security's Representative Payee Program provides benefit payment management for our beneficiaries who are incapable of managing their Social Security or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments. We determine and appoint a suitable payee to manage the use of benefits to meet the beneficiary's needs such as food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and personal comfort items. In fiscal year 2023 approximately 5.6 million payees managed \$77.9 billion in annual benefits, serving 7.7 million beneficiaries.<sup>1</sup>

We investigate any report indicating an individual's need for a payee, as well as allegations of abuse, misuse of benefits, and neglect by a payee. We receive this information on a case-by-case basis from various sources including members of the public and through multiple channels, including reports by telephone and at field offices.

### **Study to Improve Information Sharing with Adult Protective Service Agencies**

Section 103(b) of the SPSSBA requires us to study and test the administrative feasibility of improving information sharing in partnership with State APS agencies. To fulfill these requirements, we used a three-phased approach, consisting of two surveys and a one-time incoming manual data exchange that served as a proof-of-concept. We also conducted an internal analysis to determine a preliminary estimate of our information technology (IT) and operational costs.

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<sup>1</sup> [Annual Report on the Results of Periodic Representative Payee Site Reviews and Other Reviews](#)

## **Feasibility Analysis**

**Phase I. Data Collection Questionnaire** – We identified the data APS agencies collect and can potentially share electronically with us, including reports of abuse, financial misuse, abandonment, and neglect. We sent a questionnaire to APS agencies in all 50 States, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The questionnaire contained questions about the types of data the agencies collected, the data they could share with us, and any reasons why they could not share the data with us.

We received responses from 47 APS agencies. The responses indicated that 15 of the agencies could share information that may be useful in our oversight of individuals and organizations serving as payees, while 32 could not. Agencies indicated that their inability to share data was due to legal barriers, limited staff resources, and no technical capability.

**Phase II. Data Assessment** – This phase focused on those agencies that indicated an ability to share potential data with us. We sent a second, more detailed questionnaire to nine APS agencies to better understand the available information and its potential usefulness to our Representative Payee Program. The questionnaire asked about specific data elements collected and of those elements, which could be shared with us.

Overall, Phase II showed APS agencies have information that could be useful in investigating an individual's need for a payee and conducting oversight of our payees. However, the information agencies can share varied or was very limited due to state disclosure laws. We found that agencies could not share certain data elements we need, such as the victim's personally identifiable information. In addition, only two agencies have the capability to share data electronically.

**Phase III. Data Exchange Proof-of-Concept** – This phase included a one-time manual data exchange to assess the usefulness of the APS data. We defined usefulness for the purpose of this study as situations where:

- We are unaware of the allegation of abuse, potential misuse, neglect, or abandonment; and
- Investigation of the allegation is needed according to our agency policy.

Participation in the proof-of-concept was voluntary. Three State APS agencies (Virginia, Iowa, and Oklahoma) participated in the proof-of-concept and signed a Memorandum of Understanding for a one-time manual data exchange for this evaluation.

We received data in an Excel spreadsheet because some states were unable to share data electronically through a conventional data exchange. Out of the 90 reports we reviewed, 27 reports included useful data, as defined above. We assessed the need for a payee for 26 of our beneficiaries, after we investigated allegations of self-neglect and determined the need for a new payee for a beneficiary who already had a payee.

## **Administrative Analysis**

We evaluated the effort to establish an electronic data exchange to collect data from APS agencies. Implementation would require funding to set up and maintain the IT infrastructure to support an incoming data exchange. These costs include creation, development, and maintenance of an automated system that would receive and store incoming data from APS agencies. The system would screen and process the data and generate alerts for our field office employees. We estimate that the investment to set up the IT infrastructure to start an electronic data exchange with State APS agencies would be approximately \$4,000,000. However, these costs do not include State charges for providing the data.

## **Conclusion**

Through this study we found that data sharing with State APS agencies could potentially improve our assessment of the program. Based on our study, we will continue to evaluate short and long-term data sharing processes with state agencies, with consideration of the IT costs and administrative burden.