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The Social Security Administration Taking on Immigration and Employment Eligibility: Not Ready for Prime Time

Many who support deportation-only immigration measures are advocating for a universal electronic employment verification system (EEVS). Bills such as the “Secure America Through Verification and Enforcement (SAVE) Act” (H.R. 4088) and the “New Employee Verification Act of 2008” (H.R. 5515) would place enormous additional responsibilities on the Social Security Administration (SSA)—a critical but overburdened agency. In fact, H.R. 5515, authored by Rep. Sam Johnson (R-TX), would saddle the SSA with the job of administering the new mandatory and massive employment verification system.

A mandatory employment verification system would mean that the country’s *7.4 million employers* would have to sign up for the program. Currently, only 55,000 employers are using the E-Verify employment verification system—less than one percent of all employers. If the mandatory system were only applied to new hires, SSA would have to process *50-60 million queries per year*. In 2007, the president of the National Council of Social Security Management Associations, Inc. testified that a mandatory EEVS could “cripple SSA’s service capabilities” and negate any progress in addressing the backlog of applications for disability benefits.¹ Here is what we know about the SSA today:

All in a Day’s Work--Social Security Administration’s Work-Load:²

- Processes over 6.8 million claims for benefits, 329,000 medical continuing disability reviews, and nearly 1.5 million non-disability Supplemental Security Income (SSI) redeterminations;
- Adjudicates in 644,000 hearings annually and issues 20 million new and replacement Social Security cards;
- Processes 274 million earnings items for crediting to workers’ earnings records;
- Handles approximately 67 million transactions through SSA’s 800-number; issuing 150 million Social Security statements;
- Benefits claims from the first wave of the Baby Boomers are expected to rise by approximately 1 million a year over the next 10 years and then accelerate after that.³

Whoops! SSA Resurrecting Those They Deemed Dead:

- A harbinger of how SSA might function in the future was revealed in problems with the accuracy of SSA’s death information in which healthy Americans have been declared “dead.” As a result, they have lost their health insurance, their tax returns have been rejected, and their credit card accounts have been closed. In 2006, the SSA Inspector General discovered that SSA officials had to “resurrect” 23,366 people between January

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2004 and September 2005; meaning that the agency had inadvertently “*killed*” more than **1,100 people a month—or 35 per day.**⁴

Customer Service Already Heading South:

- The average wait time for the more than three-quarters of a million cases awaiting a hearing decision is **499 days.**⁵
- There are 60 million phone calls directed to SSA Field Offices each year—and **over half of callers received a busy signal.**⁶

SSA’s Work-Force is Shrinking:

- The agency is at its *lowest* staffing level since the early 1970s with over 1,700 Claims Representatives and over 520 Service Representatives leaving SSA Field Offices.⁷ Adding to the shortage of workers, it is anticipated that many SSA employees, particularly those hired when SSA began to administer the SSI program in 1974, will retire soon.

¹ Richard Warsinskey, Testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Finance: Funding Social Security’s Administrative Costs, “Will the Budget Meet the Mission?” National Council of Social Security Management Associations, Inc., May 23, 2007 (<http://finance.senate.gov/hearings/testimony/2007test/052307testrw.pdf>).

² Michael Astrue, Testimony before the House Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on Labor, Health, and Human Services, and Education and Related Agencies, February 28, 2008 (<http://www.ssa.gov/legislation/FINAL%20FY%202009%20Statement%20for%20the%20Record.pdf>).

³ Richard Warsinskey, Testimony before the House Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on Labor, Health, and Human Services, and Education and Related Agencies (National Council of Social Security Management Associations, Inc., February 8, 2008 (<http://socsecperspectives.blogspot.com/2008/02/social-security-advocacy-group-written.html>)).

⁴ Johnson, Alex & Nancy Amons. “Government Records Incorrectly Kill Off Thousands, and There’s No Easy Fix,” MSNBC and NBC News, February 29, 2008 (<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/23378093/>).

⁵ Patrick P. O’Carroll, Jr., Reducing the Disability Backlog at the Social Security Administration, Testimony before the House Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on Labor, Health, and Human services, and Education and Related Agencies, February 28, 2008 (http://www.ssa.gov/oig/communications/testimony_speeches/02282008testimony.htm).

⁶ Warsinskey 2008.

⁷ Warsinskey 2008.

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