



Office *of the* Inspector General

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Audit Report

Disabled Beneficiaries Whose
Benefits Have Been Suspended for
Address Development, Whereabouts
Unknown or Miscellaneous Reasons

A-09-18-50523 | October 2020

MEMORANDUM

Date: October 21, 2020

Refer To:

To: The Commissioner

From: Inspector General

Subject: Disabled Beneficiaries Whose Benefits Have Been Suspended for Address Development, Whereabouts Unknown or Miscellaneous Reasons (A-09-18-50523)

The attached final report presents the results of the Office of Audit's review. The objective was to determine whether the Social Security Administration had taken appropriate actions for disabled beneficiaries whose benefits it suspended for address development, whereabouts unknown, or miscellaneous reasons.

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



Gail S. Ennis

Attachment

Disabled Beneficiaries Whose Benefits Have Been Suspended for Address Development, Whereabouts Unknown or Miscellaneous Reasons

A-09-18-50523



October 2020

Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) had taken appropriate actions for disabled beneficiaries whose benefits it suspended for address development, whereabouts unknown, or miscellaneous reasons.

Background

SSA may suspend beneficiaries' payments when their whereabouts are reported as unknown or for address development if benefit checks are returned as undeliverable. SSA suspends benefits for "miscellaneous" reasons when no other defined reason applies.

Additionally, SSA performs continuing disability reviews (CDR) of beneficiaries at selected intervals to determine whether they should continue receiving benefits. SSA will suspend benefits if a beneficiary does not cooperate with a CDR and will terminate disability benefits after 12 months if the beneficiary does not provide necessary information.

We identified 35,616 disabled beneficiaries between ages 21 and 62 whose benefits SSA had suspended for address development, whereabouts unknown, or miscellaneous reasons as of December 2017.

Findings

SSA did not always take appropriate actions for disabled beneficiaries whose benefits it suspended for address development, whereabouts unknown, or miscellaneous reasons. Based on our random sample, we estimate SSA should have

- terminated disability benefits for about 5,699 beneficiaries who did not cooperate with a CDR or requested SSA terminate their benefits. These beneficiaries had approximately \$336.7 million in suspended benefits since the date SSA should have terminated their benefits;
- documented its attempts to locate about 6,055 beneficiaries who had approximately \$452.7 million in suspended benefits; and
- reinstated disability benefits totaling approximately \$197.2 million payable to 3,918.

This occurred because SSA did not have adequate controls to ensure it (1) terminated benefits for beneficiaries who did not cooperate with CDRs, (2) terminated benefits for beneficiaries who requested their benefits be terminated, (3) made or documented its attempts to obtain a correct address when the current one could not be verified or when mail was returned as undeliverable, and (4) reinstate benefits after obtaining a correct address.

Recommendations

We made four recommendations for SSA to take corrective actions for disabled beneficiaries whose benefits were suspended for address development, whereabouts unknown, or miscellaneous reasons.

SSA agreed with our recommendations.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CDR	Continuing Disability Review
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
POMS	Program Operations Manual System
SSA	Social Security Administration

OBJECTIVE

Our objective was to determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) had taken appropriate actions for disabled beneficiaries whose benefits it suspended for address development, whereabouts unknown, or miscellaneous reasons.

BACKGROUND

Title II of the *Social Security Act* specifies that individuals who are insured for disability insurance benefits, have not attained retirement age, are U.S. citizens or nationals, have applied for disability insurance benefits, and meet established criteria shall be entitled to a disability insurance benefit.¹

SSA must have a current address for all beneficiaries to contact them when necessary to ensure that benefit entitlement still exists.² SSA may suspend beneficiaries' payments when their whereabouts are reported as unknown or for address development if benefit checks are returned as undeliverable.³ When SSA employees are unable to locate the beneficiary, they must suspend benefits and annotate the Special Message field on the beneficiary's payment record.⁴ SSA employees must also document the steps taken to locate a beneficiary when suspending benefits for whereabouts unknown.⁵ After SSA locates the beneficiary, it should reinstate benefits effective with the first suspension month.⁶ SSA suspends benefits for "miscellaneous" reasons when no other defined reason applies.

Additionally, SSA performs continuing disability reviews (CDR) of beneficiaries at selected intervals to determine whether they should continue receiving benefits. SSA contacts beneficiaries during CDRs to determine whether their impairments improved and they can perform substantial gainful activity.⁷ During a CDR, SSA may suspend benefits until a decision is made about whether disability benefits should continue to avoid a possible overpayment. SSA may initiate a medical CDR after several events. These events include when (1) an individual notifies SSA that he/she has recovered from the disability or returned to work or (2) the

¹ 42 U.S.C. § 423(a) (1) and (e) (2) (govinfo.gov 2019).

² SSA, *POMS* GN 02605.055, A (April 9, 2014).

³ SSA, *POMS*, GN 02602.320, A and B (November 18, 2019) and GN 02605.055 (April 9, 2014).

⁴ SSA, *POMS*, GN 02605.055, (April 8, 2014).

⁵ SSA, *POMS*, DI 13010.160, B.2 (February 22, 2016); GN 01010.300 (November 10, 2011); and GN 02602.320, (November 18, 2019).

⁶ SSA, *POMS*, GN 02602.320, E.1 (November 18, 2019).

⁷ SSA defines substantial gainful activity as the performance of significant physical and/or mental activities in work for pay or profit, or in work of a type generally performed for pay or profit, regardless of the legality of the work. SSA, *POMS*, DI 10501.001 (January 5, 2007).

beneficiary has substantial earnings after disability onset.⁸ SSA will also suspend benefits if a beneficiary does not cooperate with a CDR and will terminate disability benefits after 12 months if the beneficiary does not provide necessary information.⁹

For this review,¹⁰ we identified 35,616 disabled beneficiaries between ages 21 and 62 whose benefits SSA had suspended for address development, whereabouts unknown, or miscellaneous reasons as of December 2017. From this population, we selected a random sample of 100 beneficiaries for review (see Appendix B).

RESULTS OF REVIEW

SSA did not always take appropriate actions for disabled beneficiaries whose benefits it suspended for address development, whereabouts unknown, or miscellaneous reasons. Based on our random sample, we estimate SSA should have

- terminated disability benefits for about 5,699 beneficiaries who did not cooperate with a CDR or requested SSA terminate their benefits. These beneficiaries had approximately \$336.7 million in suspended benefits since the date SSA should have terminated their benefits;
- documented its attempts to locate about 6,055 beneficiaries who had approximately \$452.7 million in suspended benefits; and
- reinstated benefits totaling approximately \$197.2 million payable to 3,918 beneficiaries.

This occurred because SSA did not have adequate controls to ensure it (1) terminated benefits for beneficiaries who did not cooperate with CDRs, (2) terminated benefits for beneficiaries who requested their benefits be terminated,¹¹ (3) made or documented its attempts to obtain a correct address when the current one could not be verified or when mail was returned as undeliverable, and (4) reinstated benefits after obtaining a correct address (see Appendix B).

⁸ SSA, *POMS*, DI 13001.005 A.5, (December 2, 2014).

⁹ SSA, *POMS*, DI 13015.001, B.1 (January 31, 2020).

¹⁰ In an August 2019 report, we stated SSA did not always take appropriate action for aged *retirement* beneficiaries whose payments it suspended for address, whereabouts unknown, or failure to return the foreign enforcement questionnaire. We estimated SSA did not take appropriate actions for 6,433 beneficiaries it could not locate and whose payments it suspended for 7 years or longer. These beneficiaries had approximately \$115.4 million in suspended benefits since SSA should have terminated their benefits based on a presumed date of death. We also found SSA employees did not document their attempts to locate 9,449 beneficiaries who had \$382.5 million in suspended benefits. SSA, OIG, *Follow-up: Aged Beneficiaries Whose Benefit Have Been Suspended for Address, Whereabouts Unknown, or Foreign Enforcement, A-09-16-50077* (August 2019).

¹¹ For example, a beneficiary requested termination stating he no longer needed the benefits.

Sample Results

Of the 100 sampled beneficiaries, SSA did not take appropriate action for 44 who had \$2.8 million in suspended benefits.¹² Of the 44 beneficiaries, SSA should have (1) terminated benefits to 16; (2) documented its attempts to locate 17; and (3) reinstated benefits to 11 after obtaining a correct address. Table 1 summarizes the sample results.

Table 1: Disabled Beneficiaries in Suspended Status

Description	Suspended for Address Development	Suspended for Whereabouts Unknown	Suspended for Miscellaneous Reasons	Total Suspensions
Benefits Should Have Been Terminated	4	2	10	16
No Documented Attempts to Locate Beneficiaries	17	0	0	17
Benefits Should Have Been Reinstated	3	0	8	11
Subtotal	24	2	18	44
Properly Resolved	42	2	12	56
Total	66	4	30	100

Beneficiaries Whose Benefits Should Have Been Terminated

SSA should have terminated benefits for 16 beneficiaries. As a result, \$945,272 in benefits remained in suspense for individuals who were no longer eligible for disability benefits. Terminating these benefits should prevent SSA from improperly issuing these payments and ensure there is a final resolution for those beneficiaries who would otherwise remain in suspense indefinitely. We provided SSA information on the 16 beneficiaries, and SSA agreed their benefits should have been terminated.

¹² We referred our error cases to SSA for appropriate corrective action on May 31, 2019. As of January 2020, SSA had taken corrective action on 6 of the 44 cases. The 44 beneficiaries had been in suspended pay status for an average of 90 months and a median of 72 months.

Table 2 includes the reasons the benefits to the 16 beneficiaries should have been terminated.

Table 2: Beneficiaries Whose Benefits Should Have Been Terminated

Reason for Termination	Number of Beneficiaries	Accumulated Benefits Suspended
Failure to Cooperate During a CDR	8	\$392,950
Disabled Adult Children no Longer Entitled	3	\$145,595
Requested Benefit Termination	2	\$113,618
Deceased	1	\$54,729
Whereabouts Unknown	2	\$238,381
Total	16	\$945,272

Failure to Cooperate During a CDR

When a disability beneficiary does not provide requested information or evidence needed to complete a CDR, SSA employees should make a failure to cooperate determination and suspend benefits. If the beneficiary does not cooperate after benefits have been suspended for 12 months, SSA should automatically terminate benefits effective with the 13th month.¹³

SSA did not terminate benefits to eight beneficiaries who did not cooperate during a CDR. SSA should have suspended their benefits for failure to cooperate. However, SSA employees erroneously suspended their benefits for address development or miscellaneous reasons. As a result, SSA's automated system did not identify these beneficiaries and automatically terminate their benefits.¹⁴ These eight beneficiaries had accumulated \$392,950 in suspended benefits since the date SSA should have terminated their benefits.

For example, in March 2014, SSA suspended a beneficiary's benefits because he did not cooperate during a CDR. The SSA employee incorrectly recorded a miscellaneous suspension reason instead of a suspension for failure to cooperate with a CDR. SSA systems would have automatically terminated benefits effective the 13th month from the initial date of suspension if the employee had recorded the correct suspension reason. As of March 2020, the beneficiary had been in continuous suspense for over 5 years with \$85,202 in suspended payments.

¹³ SSA, POMS, DI 13015.001, C.a, (April 4, 2017).

¹⁴ SSA, POMS, DI 13015.001, C.a, (April 4, 2017) and DI 13015.005, A.2.d, (May 19, 2017).

Benefits to Disabled Adult Children

Children of retired, disabled, or deceased wage earners may be entitled to disability benefits if they were disabled before they attained age 22. To receive benefits, the disabled adult child must be a dependent of the wage earner, have filed for child's benefits, and be unmarried.¹⁵

SSA should have terminated payments to two beneficiaries who were no longer eligible for childhood disability benefits because of marriage. Instead, SSA erroneously suspended their benefits. According to SSA, this occurred because of "input errors" made by employees. SSA had denied benefits for a third beneficiary; however, SSA did not update his payment record to reflect the denial, which would have resulted in a termination of his benefits. These three beneficiaries had accumulated \$145,595 in suspended benefits since the date SSA should have terminated their benefits.

Beneficiaries Who Requested Their Benefits be Terminated

Two beneficiaries requested that SSA terminate their benefits. When a beneficiary requests cessation of his/her benefits, SSA is required to obtain a signed statement from the beneficiary requesting that his/her benefits be suspended because he/she is no longer disabled. Additionally, SSA must make a CDR review determination before terminating benefits.¹⁶ One beneficiary has been in suspense for more than 8 years and the second beneficiary for more than 4 years. During this time, SSA took no action to complete a medical CDR and terminate benefits. These two beneficiaries had accumulated \$113,618 in suspended benefits since the date SSA should have terminated their benefits.

Deceased Beneficiary

Benefits are not payable for the month of a beneficiary's death or later. When SSA receives a death report, it must terminate the decedent's benefits. SSA should have terminated benefits to one beneficiary in September 2010 when it received a report of his death; instead SSA suspended his payments for address development. SSA stated this resulted from an input error. The deceased beneficiary had accumulated \$54,729 in suspended benefits since his death.

Beneficiary's Whereabouts Unknown

SSA policy states that whereabouts unknown is a basis for cessation and termination of disability benefits.¹⁷ We determined SSA should have terminated payments to two beneficiaries whose whereabouts were unknown. SSA suspended one beneficiary's benefits for address development in 2004 after a check was returned. SSA acknowledged there was no documentation to support

¹⁵ SSA, *POMS*, DI 10115.001 C and H, (September 4, 2014).

¹⁶ SSA, *POMS*, DI 13010.185 E.1, (October 11, 2012).

¹⁷ SSA, *POMS*, GN 02602.320, C.2, (March 14, 2014) and DI 28075.005 A, B.2 and C, (December 28, 2012).

its efforts to locate the beneficiary. In 2012, SSA initiated a CDR but was unable to locate the beneficiary. SSA suspended the benefits of a second beneficiary for whereabouts unknown in March 2016. In March 2015, SSA created a diary¹⁸ that was intended to remind the SSA employee to conduct a medical CDR in February 2018. However, the CDR was not initiated. Since the beneficiaries' whereabouts were unknown, SSA should have terminated their benefits in June 2004 for the first beneficiary and in March 2016 for the second beneficiary.¹⁹ These two beneficiaries had accumulated \$244,561 in suspended benefits.

SSA Should Have Documented its Attempts to Locate Beneficiaries

SSA did not have a current address for 17 beneficiaries and did not document its attempts to locate them. SSA may suspend benefits if it determines a beneficiary's address needs verification or a notice is returned as undeliverable and the correct address cannot be promptly verified. SSA employees should have queried payment records or contacted employers, friends, neighbors, etc., for leads to the individual's whereabouts, as required. Finally, SSA employees must record in SSA's systems their efforts to locate the beneficiary and the responses that led to the conclusion the address was unknown.²⁰ There was no evidence in SSA's systems that any efforts were made to locate the 17 beneficiaries. We provided SSA with information for the 17 beneficiaries and it agreed that there was no evidence of actions taken to determine the whereabouts and addresses for the beneficiaries.

SSA generates an alert 60 days after it suspends a beneficiary's benefits for address development and generates a second alert 6 months after the initial alert. SSA instructs employees to record their efforts to locate the beneficiary in the special message field of the beneficiary's payment record to avoid duplication of resolution activity. We did not find messages recorded in SSA's systems or in the beneficiaries' payment records that indicate SSA employees attempted to locate the 17 beneficiaries. SSA accrued approximately \$1.2 million in suspended benefits for these 17 beneficiaries.

For example, a beneficiary's payment for June 7, 2012 was returned to SSA. On June 27, 2012, SSA sent the beneficiary a notice to inform him that it would suspend his benefits because his payments had been returned and SSA needed his current address. We found no evidence of SSA employees' attempts to contact the beneficiary's financial institution or the U.S. Postal Service requesting a current address as required by SSA policy.²¹ The beneficiary has been in suspended status for address development for longer than 7 years with accrued benefits totaling \$120,989.

¹⁸ SSA employees establish Diary Alerts to control an action taking place in the future. The Diary Alert may be related to a current action that cannot be completed until a future date or it may be an action that is not related to any current action record.

¹⁹ SSA, *POMS*, GN 02602.320; C.2, (March 14, 2014); and DI 28075.005 A, B.2 and C, (December 28, 2012).

²⁰ SSA, *POMS*, GN 01010.300, A and B.1, (November 10, 2011).

²¹ SSA, *POMS*, GN 02605.055, B.2 (April 8, 2014).

SSA Should Have Reinstated Benefits

SSA should have reinstated the benefits for 11 beneficiaries. As of January 2020, the 11 beneficiaries were due a total of \$553,728 in benefits. SSA reviewed these cases and agreed that the beneficiaries should not have been in suspense and that the benefits should be paid. Specifics follow.

- Five beneficiaries were receiving Supplemental Security Income payments, and their current addresses were on their payment records. SSA had suspended the beneficiaries' disability payments for miscellaneous reasons or address development. Since the beneficiaries' current addresses were on the Supplemental Security Income payment record, SSA should have reinstated their benefit payments.²² As of January 20, 2020, the beneficiaries have accrued \$214,119 in disability benefits.
- One beneficiary was dually entitled²³ to disability benefits on her own record and on her father's record. She was incorrectly suspended for longer than 8 years on her father's record. Since the beneficiary is eligible to receive benefits on both records, she should be paid the higher amount, which is from the father's record. SSA agreed she is eligible for benefits from her father's record. As a result the beneficiary is due \$71,460.
- Five beneficiaries had their benefits suspended because their representative payees did not return their SSA accounting reports²⁴ or SSA was developing a new representative payee because the previous one was no longer willing to serve. SSA policy prohibits suspending a beneficiary's benefits because of a representative payee's failure to perform his/her duties or when developing a new representative payee unless the beneficiary is adjudged legally incompetent. We found no evidence in SSA's records that they were legally incompetent.²⁵ Since a new representative payee was not selected, SSA should have paid the beneficiaries directly. Consequently, the beneficiaries are due \$268,149.

CONCLUSIONS

We estimate SSA should have terminated disability benefits for about 5,699 beneficiaries whose benefits were erroneously suspended for address development or miscellaneous reasons when they should have been suspended for failure to cooperate with a CDR or requested SSA terminate their benefits. These beneficiaries had approximately \$336.7 million in suspended

²² SSA, *POMS*, GN 01010.300, A (November 10, 2011).

²³ A beneficiary is dually entitled if he/she is eligible and entitled to benefits on more than one SSN, and the potential for payment exist on more than one SSN.

²⁴ SSA is required to obtain an annual accounting report from all representative payees. If the representative payee does not respond to, or will not cooperate with, efforts to obtain and approve an accounting report, a change of representative payee, or direct payment may be in the beneficiary's best interest. SSA, *POMS*, GN 00605.090, A (June 19, 2013).

²⁵ SSA, *POMS*, GN 00504.110, B (April 15, 2016).

benefits since the date SSA should have terminated their benefits. We also estimate SSA should have documented its attempts to locate about 6,055 disabled beneficiaries who had approximately \$452.7 million in suspended benefits and reinstated benefits totaling approximately \$197.2 million payable to 3,918 beneficiaries after they were located.

In an August 2019 report, we stated SSA had not always documented its attempts to locate beneficiaries. Specifically, we reported that SSA employees did not document their attempts to locate 9,449 beneficiaries who had \$382.5 million in suspended benefits. We recommended SSA ensure it documents efforts to locate beneficiaries suspended for address, whereabouts unknown, or foreign enforcement. SSA agreed with our recommendation and stated it would draft reminders for documentation of address or whereabouts unknown suspensions. SSA plans to implement the recommendation in the fourth quarter of fiscal year 2020.

Agency Actions in Response to our Audit

In May and July 2019, we provided SSA information on the 44 beneficiaries identified in our audit. As of January 2020, SSA had taken corrective action for six of the beneficiaries. Three were returned to current pay status, two were no longer eligible for benefits, and one is deceased.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that SSA:

1. Take appropriate action for the 38 remaining beneficiaries identified by our audit.
2. Identify and take appropriate action for the estimated 15,628 beneficiaries identified in our audit population.
3. Implement controls to ensure SSA employees terminate benefits of beneficiaries who do not cooperate with a CDR or whose whereabouts SSA is unable to locate.
4. Implement controls to ensure SSA employees reinstate benefits to eligible beneficiaries.

AGENCY COMMENTS

SSA agreed with our recommendations. SSA's comments are included in Appendix C.



Michelle L. Anderson
Assistant Inspector General for Audit

APPENDICES

Appendix A – SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

We obtained a data file of records from the Master Beneficiary Record of disabled beneficiaries whose benefits had been suspended as of December 2017. From these records, we refined the number of records to include only individuals whose benefits were suspended for address development, whereabouts unknown, or miscellaneous reasons, and who were born between January 1, 1956 and December 31, 1995 to exclude retired beneficiaries. In July 2018, the audit team excluded any records without a disability diagnosis code to arrive at a population of 35,616. From this population, we selected a random sample of 100 beneficiaries for review.

To accomplish our objective, we

- reviewed the applicable sections of the *Social Security Act*, the United States Code, the Code of Federal Regulations, and SSA’s Program Operations Manual System;
- interviewed SSA employees from the Offices of Operations and Retirement and Disability Policy;
- reviewed a random sample of 100 beneficiaries’ Master Beneficiary Record, Supplemental Security Record, and Numident records from our population of 35,616;
- searched SSA’s Online Retrieval System, Non-Disability Repository for Evidentiary Documents, and the Modernized Claims Systems Report of Contact to determine whether SSA attempted to locate the disabled beneficiaries;
- determined whether SSA had taken appropriate actions for disabled beneficiaries whose benefits were suspended for address development, whereabouts unknown, or miscellaneous reasons; and
- calculated the amount of benefits held in suspense for the disabled beneficiaries.

We determined whether the computer-processed data from the Master Beneficiary Record were sufficiently reliable for our intended purpose. We tested the data to determine the completeness and accuracy. These tests allowed us to assess the reliability of the data and achieve our audit objective.

We conducted audit work in Richmond, California, and Baltimore, Maryland, between May 2019 and April 2020. The entities reviewed were the Offices of the Deputy Commissioners for Operations and Systems.

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 – SAMPLING METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

From our population of 35,616 suspended beneficiaries as discussed in Appendix A, we selected a random sample of 100 beneficiaries for review. The following tables provide the details of our sample results and statistical projections.

Table B–1: Population and Sample Size

Description	Disabled Beneficiaries
Population Size	35,616
Sample Size	100

Table B–2: Termination Errors

Description	Disabled Beneficiaries	Suspended Benefits
Sample Results	16	\$945,272
Point Estimate	5,699	\$336,668,182
Projection - Lower Limit	3,672	\$160,041,947
Projection - Upper Limit	8,288	\$513,294,417

Note: All statistical projections are at the 90-percent confidence level.

Table B–3: No Attempt to Locate

Description	Disabled Beneficiaries	Suspended Benefits
Sample Results	17	\$1,271,096
Point Estimate	6,055	\$452,713,480
Projection - Lower Limit	3,967	\$212,441,327
Projection - Upper Limit	8,687	\$692,985,633

Note: All statistical projections are at the 90-percent confidence level.

Table B–4: Benefit Reinstatement Errors

Description	Disabled Beneficiaries	Suspended Benefits
Sample Results	11	\$553,728
Point Estimate	3,918	\$197,215,907
Projection - Lower Limit	2,244	\$90,613,745
Projection - Upper Limit	6,247	\$303,818,069

Note: All statistical projections are at the 90-percent confidence level.

Appendix C – AGENCY COMMENTS



SOCIAL SECURITY

MEMORANDUM

Date: October 8, 2020

Refer To:

To: Gail S. Ennis
Inspector General

Stephanie Hall

From: Stephanie Hall
Chief of Staff

Subject: Office of the Inspector General Draft Report, “Disabled Beneficiaries Whose Benefits Have Been Suspended for Address Development, Whereabouts Unknown or Miscellaneous Reasons” (A-09-18-50523) – INFORMATION

Thank you for the opportunity to review the draft report. We agree with the recommendations.

Please let me know if we can be of further assistance. You may direct staff inquiries to Trae Sommer at (410) 965-9102.

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