

Office of the Inspector General

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION



072311 July 2025



Office of the Inspector General social security administration

MEMORANDUM

Date: July 3, 2025 Refer to: 072311

To: Frank Bisignano Commissioner

Michell & andorson From: Michelle L. Anderson Assistant Inspector General for Audit

Subject: Remittance Processing

The attached final report presents the results of the Office of Audit's review. The objective was to determine whether the Social Security Administration processed remittances according to policy.

If you wish to discuss the final report, please contact Jeffrey Brown, Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Audit.

Attachment

Remittance Processing 072311

July 2025

Objective

To determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) processed remittances according to policy.

Background

SSA refers to payments it receives from the public as remittances. When SSA pays an individual more than it should, an overpayment occurs. Repayments of overpaid funds are remittances. Remittances can also include the return of retroactive Medicare premiums, funds a representative payee conserved on a beneficiary's behalf, payments made to beneficiaries before they withdraw their claims for benefits, garnishment and court-ordered restitution payments, and incorrect payments.

SSA's Debt Management System (DMS) generally automatically credits outstanding overpayments. In certain circumstances, DMS cannot automatically credit a remittance, and a remittance exception occurs. Program service center (PSC) employees must manually reconcile remittance exceptions.

To accomplish our objective, we reviewed (1) a random sample of 50 of the nearly 1.5 million remittances submitted to SSA in Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 and (2) 175 of the over 332,000 exceptions SSA processed in FY 2023. Office of Audit Report Summary

Results

SSA employees correctly processed the 50 remittances we reviewed. Within the scope of this audit, we believe SSA likely correctly processed the nearly 1.5 million remittances it received in FY 2023. We estimate SSA employees correctly processed more than 205,000 (62 percent) of the over 332,000 remittance exceptions. However, we estimate PSC employees had not

- re-issued over \$54 million in remitted funds from nearly 50,000 exceptions processed in FY 2023;
- processed correctly over 20,000 exceptions involving approximately \$10 million in remitted funds;
- properly recorded over 34,000 remittance exceptions; or
- properly cleared almost 23,000 remittance exceptions.

In total, we estimate PSC employees incorrectly processed, or did not fully process, over 127,000 (38 percent) remittance exceptions according to policy.

SSA lacked controls to (1) ensure PSC employees took appropriate actions and (2) alert employees when they did not take proper actions during the remittance exception process. This lack of controls led to improper and questionable payments, the potential for future improper payments, and general inefficiencies in SSA's processes. Until SSA addresses these issues, employees may continue delaying the re-issuance of funds the Agency owes to tens of thousands of beneficiaries. In addition, incorrectly processed exceptions make additional work for PSC employees, which leads to increased backlogs of pending actions and employees doing unneeded work instead of focusing on priority workloads.

Recommendations

We made four recommendations for SSA to improve controls over remittance exceptions, including taking corrective action on exceptions, training employees, and reminding them of required processing steps. SSA agreed to implement our recommendations.



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ABBREVIATIONS

C.F.R.	Code of Federal Regulations
DMS	Debt Management System
FY	Fiscal Year
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
Payee	Representative Payee
POMS	Program Operations Manual System
PSC	Program Service Center
RAU	Remittance and Accounting Unit
SERS	Social Security Electronic Remittance System
SSA	Social Security Administration
U.S.C.	United States Code

OBJECTIVE

Our objective was to determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) processed remittances according to policy.

BACKGROUND

SSA refers to payments it receives from the public as remittances.¹ When SSA pays an individual more than it should, an overpayment occurs.² Repayments of overpaid funds are one type of remittance. Remittances can also include the return of retroactive Medicare premiums, funds a representative payee (payee) conserved on a beneficiary's behalf, payments made to beneficiaries before they withdraw their claims for benefits, garnishment and court-ordered restitution payments, and incorrect payments.³

The public submits remittances by mail, telephone, in person, or online using credit or debit cards or direct debits at <u>Pay.gov</u> or SSA's Online Bill Pay.⁴ Field office employees either process the remittances via SSA's web-based Social Security Electronic Remittance System (SERS) or mail the remittances to the Mid-Atlantic Program Service Center's (PSC) Remittance and Accounting Unit (RAU).⁵ RAU employees receive, examine, and deposit the remittances.⁶

After SERS or the RAU processes the remittances, SSA's Debt Management System (DMS) generally automatically credits outstanding overpayments. However, under certain circumstances, the DMS cannot automatically credit a remittance, and an exception occurs. DMS records the exception information in the Recovery of Overpayments, Accounting and Reporting system. PSC employees must manually reconcile remittance exceptions through the system and clear the exception through DMS.

¹ A remittance may be in the form of a check, money order, cash, or credit/debit card. SSA, *POMS*, GN 02403.001 (January 4, 2013).

² 42 U.S.C. §§ 404(a)(1)(A), 1383(b).

³ SSA, POMS, GN 02403.001 (January 4, 2013).

⁴ SSA, *POMS*, GN 02210.152 (June 14, 2022). SSA also uses Lockbox—a service provided by the Department of the Treasury, Fiscal Service, and its financial agent—to outsource some of its paper remittance collection responsibilities. SSA, *POMS*, GN 02403.163 (February 12, 2025). See Appendix A for more information about SSA's remittance modernization efforts.

⁵ SERS uses a check scanner and credit card processor for remittances. SSA, *POMS*, GN 02403.161 (November 18, 2024).

⁶ SSA, POMS, GN 02403.001 (January 4, 2013).

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The scope of this audit included remittances submitted to SSA, and remittance exceptions processed, in Fiscal Year (FY) 2023. We obtained data extracts of nearly 1.5 million remittances from SSA's Master Remittance File and over 332,000 exceptions from SSA's Processing Center Action Control System. We reviewed random samples of 50 remittances and 175 exceptions SSA processed in FY 2023.⁷

RESULTS OF REVIEW

SSA employees correctly processed the 50 remittances we reviewed. Within the scope of this audit, it appears SSA likely correctly processed the nearly 1.5 million remittances it received in FY 2023. Of the 175 remittance exceptions we reviewed, PSC employees processed 108 (62 percent) correctly. However, employees did not process the remaining 67 exceptions (38 percent) according to policy. Based on our sample results, we estimate SSA's PSC employees correctly processed over 205,000 remittance exceptions and incorrectly processed or did not fully process over 127,000 exceptions according to policy.

Re-issuing Funds When Required

When SSA receives remitted funds it must return or pay to an eligible individual, a PSC employee should determine whom to pay. For example, a payee who has conserved funds for a beneficiary and stops serving as the payee generally must remit those funds and interest earned thereon to SSA.⁸ The PSC employee must re-issue the returned conserved funds to a successor payee, the beneficiary if they no longer need a payee, or a deceased beneficiary's estate.⁹ When other individuals remit funds that are due a beneficiary, an underpayment may occur.¹⁰ SSA's systems detect most underpayments payable to living beneficiaries. If the system cannot pay an underpayment automatically, PSC employees must manually re-issue the funds to the beneficiary or other eligible individual.¹¹

As of November 2024, for 26 (15 percent) of the 175 exceptions we sampled, PSC employees had not determined the appropriate individuals to whom the Agency should re-issue nearly \$55,000 that was remitted and needed to be re-issued. For example, on March 14, 2022, the payee for a deceased beneficiary remitted to SSA \$26,468 in benefits the payee had conserved for the beneficiary while the beneficiary was alive, which resulted in an exception. A PSC employee cleared the exception on February 14, 2023 but did not determine who to re-issue the funds to as required. As of November 2024, the Agency had not re-issued the funds.

⁷ See Appendix B for more information on our scope and methodology and Appendix C for our sampling methodology and results.

⁸ 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.2060, 416.660.

⁹ SSA, *POMS*, GN 00603.055, B (June 10, 2024).

¹⁰ 42 U.S.C. §§ 404(a)(1)(B), 1383(b)(1)(A).

¹¹ SSA, POMS, GN 02301.020, A (January 26, 2022).

PSC employees did not re-issue funds to eligible individuals because, at the time, SSA lacked controls to (1) alert employees of certain beneficiaries whose remitted funds the Agency needed to re-issue and (2) ensure employees took the necessary actions. Before August 2024, SSA's system would only alert employees to take action on remitted funds each April and only for deceased beneficiaries who had a surviving spouse on their records. This control would not have alerted employees to take action on remitted funds for beneficiaries in any other circumstance. In August 2024, SSA updated its systems to generate an alert every month for records with deceased beneficiaries and, in February 2025, implemented a new control to prompt employees to develop and/or re-issue underpayments which may involve remitted funds due living individuals. We believe these updates may mitigate future errors.

We estimate PSC employees had not re-issued over \$54 million in remitted funds from nearly 50,000 exceptions processed in FY 2023. Because employees processed these exceptions before SSA updated controls, they may not have been alerted about the unpaid funds. The Agency must identify individuals to pay and release the remitted funds to them.

Following Policy When Reissuing Funds

SSA policy outlines the steps PSC employees must take before they re-issue funds to a beneficiary or other eligible individual. For example, when a court remits garnished funds to SSA, PSC employees must determine why the court returned the funds so they can either apply the funds to another applicable garnishment order on the beneficiary's record or return the funds to the beneficiary. In addition, PSC employees should re-issue conserved funds remitted by a former payee to the new payee, beneficiary, or beneficiary's legal representative.¹² Conserved funds are not underpayments and therefore cannot be used to reduce overpayments.¹³

Of the 175 remittance exceptions we sampled, PSC employees did not follow the policy related to re-issuing remitted funds for 11 (6 percent). These errors may not have resulted in improper payments, but we question whether SSA correctly re-issued or recorded over \$5,000 because employees did not comply with SSA's policy.

For example, on April 3, 2023, a former payee remitted to SSA \$529 in benefits the payee had conserved for a beneficiary, which caused an exception. On September 28, 2023, a PSC employee posted \$529 to the beneficiary's record but did not properly identify the funds as conserved. As a result, SSA's system automatically used the funds to reduce the beneficiary's outstanding overpayment when the PSC employee should have re-issued the \$529 to the beneficiary or the new payee as required. SSA incorrectly used the remitted funds to reduce the beneficiary's overpayment balance rather than re-issuing the funds to the eligible individual.

¹² SSA, *POMS*, GN 00603.055, B.1 (June 10, 2024).

¹³ SSA, *POMS*, GN 02301.001, B (September 14, 2017) and GN 02210.001, A (June 25, 2024).

These errors may have occurred because some PSC employees may not have been as equipped to process remittance exceptions as they were other workloads. PSC employees did not process exceptions frequently and may not have received refresher training on this type of work. Though PSC employees were initially trained on processing exceptions, that was a small portion of their workload. Since exceptions occur intermittently, SSA did not conduct refresher or annual training like it did for more regular workloads. Therefore, some PSC employees may need additional training on this type of work, while others may need refresher training on their retained skills.

We estimate PSC employees incorrectly processed exceptions for about 20,000 remittances totaling \$10 million. For these exceptions, PSC employees either re-issued funds to individuals and possibly should not have; should have re-issued remitted funds to eligible individuals but did not; or did not appropriately record the remittances in SSA's system to reflect accurate overpayment balances.

Recording Correct Information

When SSA employees or systems process a remittance under an incorrect record, a remittance exception occurs. Policy requires that a PSC employee update the remittance exception to reflect the correct record before they process.

Of the 175 remittance exceptions we sampled, PSC employees did not take the appropriate steps to record 18 (10 percent). For eight of these exceptions, PSC employees mis-keyed information or made other errors during processing. For the remaining 10 exceptions, PSC employees initially input the remittance information on the incorrect individuals' records. Employees subsequently identified the errors and re-issued the remitted funds to the correct individuals; however, the employees did not update the exception to reflect the correct record information before they processed it, as required by policy. SSA subject-matter experts from the Office of Operations stated if a PSC employee ". . . reinputs the exception to the correct [record], and there is no debt, another exception is generated which requires another action."

We believe these errors occurred because PSC employees may not have seen the need to input the remittance information under the correct record after they paid the correct individuals. In addition, SSA did not have controls to ensure employees took the required actions.

We estimate PSC employees did not take all appropriate steps to record over 34,000 remittance exceptions. These errors did not result in improper payments; however, as illustrated in the examples above, employees' failure to follow policies can lead SSA to re-issue funds to the wrong beneficiaries or not re-issue the funds at all.

Clearing Completed Remittance Exceptions

Of the 175 exceptions we sampled, PSC employees did not take the necessary steps to clear 12 (7 percent) after they re-issued remitted funds to beneficiaries or other eligible individuals. When PSC employees process and clear exceptions, they must update the system with the exception control number, the amount of the remittance, where the remittance should be applied, and the reason the exception was deleted. The system will send PSC employees an alert every 60 days until they clear the exception.

Though SSA trained PSC employees to clear remittance exceptions, employees may not have realized the need to clear the exceptions from the system once the funds were reissued because they did not process the exceptions frequently. Additionally, SSA did not have a control that prompted PSC employees to clear exceptions when they took action to resolve remitted funds. As a result, even though there is no further action employees must take, additional exceptions will continue to alert every 60 days until employees clear them. Each time a new alert is generated, a PSC employee must determine whether the exception has been resolved. This creates unnecessary work for PSC employees and increases pending workloads. We estimate PSC employees did not properly clear almost 23,000 remittance exceptions, which led to multiple unnecessary exception alerts that employees must clear.

CONCLUSION

SSA lacked controls to (1) ensure PSC employees took appropriate actions and (2) alert employees when they did not take proper actions during the remittance exception process. This lack of controls led to improper and questionable payments, the potential for future improper payments, and general inefficiencies in SSA's processes. SSA potentially did not make proper payments, or made questionable payments, of approximately \$64 million because employees did not always comply with policies for processing exceptions. Until SSA addresses these issues, employees may continue delaying the re-issuance of funds the Agency owes to tens of thousands of beneficiaries. In addition, incorrectly processed exceptions lead to additional work for PSC employees resulting in increased backlogs of pending actions and employees doing unneeded work instead of focusing on priority workloads. It is essential that SSA improve its controls to ensure employees process exceptions accurately.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend SSA:

- 1. Review, and take appropriate corrective action for, the 67 remittance exceptions that employees processed incorrectly.
- 2. Using a risk-based approach, review, and take appropriate actions on, remaining unissued remittance funds.
- 3. Provide targeted training to PSC employees who process remittance exceptions on the policy-compliant procedures to address the errors we identified.
- 4. Remind employees who process remittance exceptions of the required steps to process them and the potential effects of not following policies.

AGENCY COMMENTS

SSA agreed to implement our recommendations; see Appendix D.



Appendix A – **REMITTANCE MODERNIZATION EFFORTS**

The Social Security Administration (SSA) has implemented new systems and processes to automate remittance processing and streamline its collections process. We reviewed SSA's actions to modernize remittance processing. A summary of the information we gathered follows.

Pay.gov

In January 2021, SSA partnered with the Department of the Treasury's <u>Pay.gov</u> team to implement the first on-line repayment option for Old-Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance beneficiaries and Supplemental Security Income recipients to repay benefit overpayments via credit/debit cards and Automated Clearing House. From Fiscal Years (FY) 2021 through 2023, SSA collected approximately \$266 million through <u>Pay.gov</u>.¹ The public's use of <u>Pay.gov</u> has increased since its inception (see Table A–1).

Lockbox

In January 2021, SSA began using Lockbox—a service provided by the Department of the Treasury, Fiscal Service, and its financial agent to outsource some of its paper remittance collection responsibilities. In February 2021, SSA began routing paper remittances to Lockbox for processing. From February 2021 through FY 2023, SSA collected about \$161 million through Lockbox. The public's use of the Lockbox has decreased since FY 2022 (see Table A–1) possibly because of the increased use of electronic remittances.

Online Bill Pay

In July 2021, SSA implemented Online Bill Pay, which allows overpaid individuals to make a one-time or recurring Automated Clearing House draft from a bank account using a personal computer or mobile telephone. From July 2021 through FY 2023, SSA collected approximately \$6.6 million through Online Bill Pay. The public's use of Online Bill Pay has increased since its inception (see Table A–1).

¹ SSA stopped reporting the amount collected via <u>Pay.gov</u>, Lockbox, and Online Bill Pay in FY 2023. SSA, *Agency Financial Report Fiscal Year 2021*, *SSA Publication No. 31-231*, p. 39 (November 2021); SSA, *Agency Financial Report Fiscal Year 2022*, *SSA Publication No. 31-231*, p. 39 (November 2022); SSA, *Agency Financial Report Fiscal Year 2023*, *SSA Publication No. 31-231*, p. 48 (November 2023).

Conclusion

Modernized remittance tools have relieved SSA's Remittance and Accounting Unit (RAU) from processing most paper remittances and allowed it to focus on other workloads. According to SSA, modernizing the remittance process has reduced the volume of remittances processed at the RAU by 48 percent—from 989,588 in FY 2021 to 511,854 in FY 2023. As part of its Payment Integrity Scorecard for the fourth quarter of FY 2024, SSA indicated it will continue refining these new processes to reduce exceptions and provide more ways for the public or other agencies to pay remittances while reducing the burden of the collection process for the Agency.² SSA will continue using the current programs to process remittances. As of June 2024, SSA had no additional efforts to modernize, automate, or streamline the remittance process.

			FY 2023	FY 2024	Total
Pay.gov	323,8584	456,560	464,298	465,698	1,710,414
Lockbox	195,294⁵	264,638	216,358	194,955	871,245
Online Bill Pay	406 ⁶	18,167	41,500	48,939	109,012
TOTAL	519,558	739,365	722,156	709,592	2,690,671

Table A–1: Number of Remittances by Method³

² Chief Financial Officer's Council, *Payment Integrity Scorecard*, cfo.gov (April 16, 2025).

³ We did not audit these numbers provided by SSA.

⁴ SSA began allowing the public to remit payments via <u>Pay.gov</u> in January 2021.

⁵ SSA began using Lockbox to process paper remittances in February 2021.

⁶ SSA began allowing the public to remit payments using Online Bill Pay in July 2021.

Appendix B – **SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY**

To accomplish our objective, we:

- Analyzed the Social Security Administration's (SSA) policies and procedures for receiving, forwarding, and processing remittances and remittance exceptions, including guidelines and time frames for processing remittances.
- Requested management information and workload reports from SSA to identify, among other things, the number of pieces and age of mail related to remittance processing.
- Obtained from the Master Remittance File 1,461,626 remittances from Fiscal Year (FY) 2023.¹ We reviewed a random sample of these remittances to determine whether SSA processed remittances correctly.
- Obtained from the Processing Center Action Control System 332,481 remittance exceptions processed in FY 2023. We reviewed a random sample to determine:
 - o the amount of any delayed recovery or refund;
 - o whether the remitter contacted SSA about the refund; and
 - o whether SSA employees processed completed exceptions correctly.²
- Assessed SSA's ongoing efforts to modernize, automate, and streamline the remittance process using Lockbox, Online Bill Pay, and <u>Pay.gov</u>.

For the sampled items, we reviewed the Debt Management System; Evidence Portal; Master Beneficiary Record; Supplemental Security Income Detail record; and Recovery of Overpayments, Accounting, and Reporting system.

We conducted our review from June 2024 through March 2025. We assessed the reliability of the data extract provided by conducting electronic testing and reviewing existing information about the data and the system that produced them. We determined the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report.

The principal entity audited was SSA's Office of Operations. We assessed the significance of internal controls necessary to satisfy the audit objective. This included an assessment of five internal control components. In addition, we reviewed the principles of internal controls associated with the audit objective.

¹ SSA's management information indicated the Agency received 1,453,958 remittances in FY 2023. We found the slight variance in total initial remittances was immaterial and determined our population to be reliable.

² See Appendix C for our sampling methodology and results.

We identified the following components and principles as significant to the audit objective.

- Component 1 Control Environment
 - o Principle 4: Demonstrate Commitment to Competence
- Component 2 Risk Assessment
 - Principle 9: Analyze and Respond to Change
- Component 3 Control Activities
 - Principle 10: Design Control Activities
 - Principle 12: Implement Control activities
- Component 5 Monitoring
 - Principle 16: Perform Monitoring Activities
 - Principle 17: Remediate Deficiencies

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and conduct the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective.

Appendix C – **SAMPLING METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS**

We obtained our populations as detailed in Appendix B. To conduct this review, we used a simple random sample statistical approach. This is a standard statistical approach used for creating a sample from a sampling frame completely at random. Each sample item had an equal chance of selection, and the selection of one item had no impact on the selection of other items. This guaranteed we chose a sample that represented the sampling frame, absent human biases, and ensured statistically valid conclusions of, and projections to, the entire sampling frame under review. Our sampling approach for this review ensures the reported projections are statistically sound and defensible.

Table C–1: Sample Descriptions, Population Sizes, and Sample Sizes

Sample Descriptions	Population Size	Sample Size
Remittances	1,461,626	50
Remittance Exceptions	332,481	175

We did not sample more than 50 remittances because we did not find errors in the 50 we reviewed.

Remittance Exceptions Sample Results and Projections

Of the 175 remittance exceptions we sampled, Social Security Administration (SSA) employees processed 67 (38 percent) incorrectly. Of the 332,481 exceptions processed, we estimate employees made 127,293 processing errors. Of the 67 errors we identified, 37 resulted in \$59,911 in improper payments or questioned costs. We removed a \$26,468 outlier, leaving \$33,443 in improper payments or questioned costs.

Description	Number of Errors	Error Amounts
Sample Results ¹	67	\$33,443
Projected Quantity/Point Estimate	127,293	\$63,538,069
Projected Lower Limit	106,868	\$36,748,381
Projected Upper Limit	148,718	\$90,327,757

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

To determine our error breakdown by finding, we conducted a proportional analysis on the projected quantity. We compiled our errors by category and determined the percentage of each error to the total and determined the total percentage of projected errors for each error category.

¹ Of the 67 errors, 36 resulted in \$33,443 in improper payments or questioned costs. We removed one error with \$26,468 in improper payments from our projection calculations because it was an outlier. We did not identify improper payments or questioned costs for the remaining 30 exceptions that employees processed incorrectly.

Description	Number of Errors	Percent of Total	Projected Errors (Percent of Total Times Projected Quantity, see Table C–1)
Employees Did Not Re-issue Funds When Required	26	39	49,644
Employees Did Not Follow Policy When Re-issuing Funds	11	16	20,367
Employees Did not Record Correct Information	18	27	34,369
Employees Did not Clear Completed Remittance Exceptions	12	18	22,913
TOTAL	67	100	127,293

Table C–2: Errors by Category

To determine our projected error dollars by finding, we conducted proportional analysis on the point estimate. We compiled our errors by category and determined the percent of each error to the total. We then determined the total percent of projected errors for each error category. To find our total error dollars, we added back the \$26,468 outlier we identified during analysis.

Description	Error Amounts	Percent of Total	Projected Error Amounts (Percent of Total Times Point Estimate, see Table C–1)	Outlier	Total (Projected Error Amounts plus Outlier)
Employees Did Not Re-issue Funds When Required	\$28,396	85	\$54,007,359	\$26,468	\$54,033,827
Employees Did Not Follow Policy When Re-issuing Funds	\$5,047	15	\$9,530,710	\$0	\$9,530,710
TOTAL	\$33,443	100	\$63,538,069	\$26,468	\$63,564,537

Appendix D – AGENCY COMMENTS



MEMORANDUM

From:

Date: June 20, 2025

Refer To: TQA-1

To: Michelle L. Anderson Acting Inspector General

Chad Poist Chief of Staff

Subject: Office of the Inspector General Draft Memorandum "Remittance Processing" (072311) --INFORMATION

Thank you for the opportunity to review the draft report. We agree with the recommendations. We plan to review agency procedures related to remittance processing. We will explore targeted training and reminders to enhance employee accuracy in processing remittance exceptions.

Please let me know if I can be of further assistance. You may direct staff inquiries to Amy Gao at (410) 966-1711.



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