

## Social Security Online Services

SSA began offering a limited number of online services in 1999. Gradually over the next 10 years, the agency expanded its menu of services to include applications for benefits and post-entitlement services. In November 2000, applications for retirement benefits were made available online, followed by applications for spousal benefits in 2001 and disability benefits in 2002. These first online applications were essentially the same electronic applications used by SSA personnel who know the intricacies of the programs and understand the significance of the questions being asked. As a result, the public had difficulty completing the applications online and the percentage of online filing was low – between 10 and 15 percent.

In December 2008, SSA unveiled a new Internet application process called iClaims. The process was created as part of the agency's *Ready Retirement*<sup>1</sup> project designed to address the increase in the number of retirement claim applications, including nearly 80 million baby boomers over the next 20 years (an average of 10,000 per day). The goal of the project is to boost the number of benefit applications that are submitted online.

SSA is working to improve the user interface on its website to make online filing easier and more “friendly.” A major public awareness campaign was mounted and included public service announcements featuring Patty Duke and Chubby Checker. The agency claims that the public response has been highly favorable to the initiative, and the percent of online filing has increased.

SSA has set a goal of 50 percent of retirement applications to be submitted online by 2012. As of January, 2011, the percentage of online benefit claims was:

- Retirement claims – 41.6%
- Disability claims – 32.1%
- Spouses claims – 17.3%

SSA received its 2 millionth online application during the week of June 5, 2009, a year after the revamped iClaim was launched officially. In contrast, it took the agency more than 7 years to receive the first 1 million online claims. In fiscal year 2010, SSA launched the Online Medicare Application for individuals who elect to delay retirement benefits beyond age 65 but who want to enroll in Medicare at age 65. In the first 6 months the application was available, 107,884 online Medicare applications were received. At the end of January 2011, 47 percent of all Medicare only claims were filed online.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that SSA has streamlined some of its policies in support of *Ready Retirement* by:

- Eliminating the need to submit paper copies of birth certificates, death certificates, and earnings information. The agency is expanding the use of automated data exchanges,
- Eliminating the need to ask for information already contained in agency systems or databases; key policies and procedures have been simplified,
- Eliminating the need for staff resources to respond to requests for retirement benefit estimates by providing online tools (such as a benefit estimator) to help individuals plan for retirement.

SSA states that the use of iClaim has reduced the time and effort required for the public to apply online and the resulting decrease in walk-in and phone applications provides the agency with additional resources to process other workloads. SSA estimates that cost savings and cost avoidance for fiscal year 2009 for retirement applications was \$722,262, and projects that for fiscal year 2010 through fiscal year 2018 the initiative will achieve additional cost savings and cost avoidance of \$52,297,998 (discounted for inflation using OMB's Office of Economic Policy's Discount and Inflation Rates). The agency states that these cost savings and cost avoidances are the result of the reduction in handling time for applications by SSA employees—it shortens the time it takes to file online from 45 to 15 minutes.

The agency collaborated with members of Congress and their staffs, the Office of Management and Budget, and advocacy groups to develop iClaim. SSA is working with social organizations, human resource professionals, libraries, and others to promote access to the website. Feedback received from users, the American Customer Satisfaction Index, and other sources are used to evaluate iClaim's effectiveness and identify areas for improvement.

### **Authentication**

SSA's website currently has a secure login as well as some basic authentication features. One barrier to a more robust Internet services, however, is the implementation of an authentication process that allows two-way communication with the public (two-way communication is an online exchange of information with the end user). For instance, SSA would not only collect information from the user, but would also be able to share earnings records, employment history and related material for the end user to review.

While these services will be more useful and attractive, they also carry greater risk of inappropriate disclosure. SSA needs to develop more secure authentication protocols that meet existing standards and guidelines fully. These authentication protocols must be attractive and accessible to one-time users in order to be successful in enhancing online service delivery.

SSA has been working on an authentication process and is expected to have it in place sometime in 2011. The process being considered will meet the National Institute of Standards and Technology's risk assessment level 2 or level 3 which measures how confident the agency can be about the validity of an individual's identity.

### **Union Concerns with Online Filing**

The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), the union at SSA that represents the largest number of its employees, has voiced concerns about the agency's use of online applications; most notably at an April 2010 hearing before the Social Security Subcommittee of the House Ways and Means Committee. Those concerns include:

- All Internet claims are reviewed by a claims representative after they are filed. An April 2008 survey by AFGE of over 1,000 claims representatives who reviewed Internet claims indicated that 71 percent of respondents stated that they re-contacted 90-100 percent of claimants due to errors, discrepancies and/or omissions in their applications. Ninety four

percent of survey respondents stated that 50 percent or more of applicants had to be re-contacted for some reason.

- People applying for Social Security benefits, whether elderly or disabled, are now strongly encouraged to use Internet self-service as much as possible rather than file with the help of a trained SSA employee. In the process of simplifying the system, however, many benefit application questions, including some that can affect entitlement determinations and payments directly, were omitted.
- Pressuring disabled and elderly Social Security applicants to use the Internet to apply for benefits is a radical departure from SSA's traditional policy which allowed customers the absolute right to determine how they do their business with the government. In the past, the public had the option of communicating with SSA by phone, meet face-to-face with SSA employees, or use computers and on-line services. The agency also assured the public that it would carry out its mission with a "human touch." iClaim changed all that by eliminating much of the advice and assistance that SSA employees have provided to the public and reducing the need for employee involvement in the claims process.

### **OIG Audit of Online Filing Process**

At the April 2010 hearing, the House Ways and Means' Subcommittee on Social Security asked the Inspector General (IG) to do a study to determine whether applicants using iClaims are receiving appropriate service. The IG has completed four studies in this area and recently released his first report, *Applicant Experiences with Retirement Insurance Benefit Internet Claim*.

The IG reported that during his interviews with the applicants he heard no comments that indicated the individuals using the iClaim application did not receive an appropriate level of service from SSA. Applicants also reported being recontacted by SSA when it was necessary to obtain clarifying or additional information. The IG noted: "we found that applicant satisfaction with the RIB iClaim application was extremely high. Specifically, 99 percent of the applicants found their overall experience filing online to be excellent, very good, or good."

The full report can be found at: <http://www.socialsecurity.gov/oig/ADOBEPDF/A-07-10-20167.pdf>.