

# The Social Security Benefits

4th  
Edition

## HANDBOOK



- ✓ Eligibility Requirements
- ✓ Application Process
- ✓ Dual Entitlements
- ✓ Disability Guidelines
- ✓ Medicare Information

Stanley A. Tomkiel III  
Attorney at Law

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THE  
SOCIAL  
SECURITY  
BENEFITS  
HANDBOOK

*4th Edition*

Stanley A. Tomkiel III  
*Attorney at Law*



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# INTRODUCTION

The Social Security program in the United States is a massive system of complex and complicated laws, rules, and bureaucracies. Confusion and frustration await people looking for a quick and easy way to access accurate and specific information about Social Security benefits.

Although the Social Security Administration (SSA) provides the public with information and advice about the programs it administers, the reality is, despite its best efforts, many people find it difficult to get the particular information they need, or even to know what they need. And some things are purposely not disseminated, such as SSA's guidelines on accepting compromise offers to settle overpayments (see Section (Sec.) 1110), your right to file only for Medicare without filing for retirement benefits (see Sec. 404.2—sometimes this is beneficial), or your option to prorate work deductions instead of full withholding of benefits (see Sec. 803.1).

The system is complex, with many variables. A bare statement of rules, without practical examples of how they apply in spe-

cific cases, is inadequate. Frequently, generalizations are not helpful. Even though it is often beneficial to file for benefits three months in advance of retirement, some people may actually lose some benefits. (see Sec. 404.1.) Even though this rule of thumb applies in many cases, it is small consolation if you lose thousands of dollars by following it.

Sometimes the realities of how the system works do not fit in with the official policies of how it should work. SSA usually does an admirable job. We have included practical information for common problems that beneficiaries confront, such as what to do if checks don't come (see Sec. 1011), if you have to wait for hours to speak with someone (see Sec. 105), if interviewers are incompetent or inexperienced, or if Social Security wants erroneously paid benefits to be returned. (see Chapter 11.) Certainly these things happen in only a relatively small number of cases, but if yours is one of them, you need some practical advice. You are not likely to find it in a pamphlet.

This handbook was designed to give you all the major rules about Social Security benefits:

- to show you how they work in particular cases;
- to highlight the situations that can make a dollars and cents difference, or are often misunderstood; and,
- to give you the benefit of my practical experience in dealing with thousands of cases as a “front line” Social Security official.

The handbook contains fourteen chapters by topic, divided into more than two hundred numbered and captioned sections for easy access to specific information, with numerous cross-references and examples for better understanding. It covers just about everything you need to know about monthly benefits.

Hopefully this book will save you time, frustration, and perhaps even some money. The *Social Security Benefits Handbook* will give you a unique understanding and serve as a handy reference source for accurate, substantial, and practical knowledge about this very important part of your life.

Because Social Security rules change periodically, you may find updated information arranged according to the chapter and section structure of this book at the author's website at:

[www.SocialSecurityBenefitsHandbook.com](http://www.SocialSecurityBenefitsHandbook.com)



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# THE SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

# 1

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## SECTION 101 **THE SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION—IN GENERAL**

The Social Security Administration (SSA) is the branch of the federal government that has the duty of administering several provisions of the *Social Security Act*. The Social Security Administration was under the jurisdiction of the Department of Health and Human Services until March 1995, when it became an independent agency. The Social Security Administration is one of the largest government agencies in



the country. The *Social Security Act* provides for the payment of monthly benefits to retired and disabled workers and their dependents, and to certain survivors of covered workers who are deceased. Social Security also provides for Medicare and other programs such as Supplemental Security Income and Black Lung benefits. The benefits referred to as Social Security benefits, however, are those monthly benefits payable to retired workers, disabled workers, and the survivors of covered workers. Because regular Social Security benefits are based on the earnings of covered workers, the SSA also keeps track of the earnings of almost all American workers.

The SSA pays \$39.7 billion each month to 47 million people throughout the United States. There are 155 million covered workers whose wages are recorded by the Social Security Administration each year. For each beneficiary receiving a check, there are 3.4 workers paying taxes. These workers and their employers pay \$500 billion to the government for Social Security taxes. Taxes are collected by the Internal Revenue Service and then reported by the IRS to the SSA.

The SSA is divided into many different bureaus and branches to accomplish all of its duties. The main offices are located in Baltimore, Maryland. The SSA divides the entire United States into districts and each has its own district office. Many of these district offices also have branch offices. There are over 1300 district and branch offices (collectively called *field offices*) throughout the nation. The district office is designed to handle all contact with members of the public. Most dealings you may have with the SSA will normally be done through your local district office.

This chapter discusses the different bureaus, their general functions, and the different types of district office employees with whom you will come in contact.

## SECTION 102 INTERNAL OFFICES

The Social Security Administration (SSA) makes contact with members of the public through district offices and Teleservice Centers. (see Sec. 103 and Sec. 105.) However, much of the work of the SSA is done by people in offices that have no contact with the public. These internal offices are some that never come into the public view.

### Central Office (CO)

The main office of the SSA is called the *Central Office*. It is the headquarters of the SSA and is located in Baltimore, Maryland. The Central Office issues all regulations and instructions to the district offices. It interprets the law and issues policy statements.

### Office of Central Records Operations

The *Office of Central Records Operations* (OCRO) deals with the huge volume of information necessary to perform the duties of the Social Security Administration. Its main functions include the assigning of Social Security numbers to workers, keeping track of changes of names on Social Security records, and maintaining the records of earnings reported by employers for each individual Social Security number. This office is also located in Baltimore, Maryland. When a person files a claim for

Social Security benefits, the district office where the claim is being handled must contact the Office of Central Records Operations to obtain the earnings record of the worker.

### **Program Service Centers**

There are six *Program Service Centers* (PSCs) located throughout the United States. These offices process claims that cannot be processed by the district office. The PSCs also process reinstatement of benefits after they have been suspended or terminated. After a claim has been processed in a district office, it is sent to the Program Service Center for storage and further processing. The claims folders are generally assigned to the different Program Service Centers based on the Social Security number of the person on whose earnings the claim is based. Sometimes the Program Service Center will have direct contact with beneficiaries. The PSC handles things such as student reports, annual reports of earnings, and overpayment notices. Any information requested from a Program Service Center can be returned directly or can be returned through a local district office, whichever is preferred.

### **Office of Disability Operations**

The *Office of Disability Operations* (ODO) is similar to a Program Service Center, but it handles cases of disability benefits. A disabled worker, age 59 or older, has his or her file maintained in the Program Service Center instead of the Office of Disability Operations. The files of disabled workers *under* age fifty-nine are kept in the Office of Disability Operations. This office is located in Baltimore, Maryland.

When the person turns 65, his or her disability benefit is automatically converted to a retirement benefit by the Program Service Center. This conversion to a retirement benefit is only a technicality, as the amount of the benefit does not change.

### **Division of International Operations**

The *Division of International Operations* (DIO) is similar to the Program Service Center, but it covers cases where beneficiaries reside outside of the United States. It is also located in Baltimore, Maryland.

### **Regional Offices**

The entire United States is divided into ten regions by the Social Security Administration. Each region has a *regional office* (RO) that deals directly with the Central Office, and then deals with the local district offices within the region. An individual district office in the region does not have direct contact with the Central Office. Instead, it deals through its regional office. The regional office is staffed with experts in all areas of Social Security. Regional offices also review the district offices to make sure that they are applying the rules and regulations of Social Security consistently.

## SECTION 103 TELEPHONE SERVICES

The Social Security Administration (SSA) has set up special centers designed to handle telephone inquiries from members of the public. These are called *Teleservice Centers* (TSC). They are designed to take the burden of voluminous phone calls

away from the district office. The nationwide toll free number is 800-772-1213. Service representatives handle calls from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. on business days, with prerecorded information and automated services available after hours. Between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m., hearing impaired callers with TDD equipment can call 800-325-0778. Medicare information is available from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Eastern time at 800-MEDICARE (800-633-4227). The telephone service is busiest in the early part of the week and the early part of the month—you will get through quicker if you call at other times.

The Teleservice Centers are staffed by service representatives. They have computer terminals available to obtain the computer records of all beneficiaries who have claims that have been established on the computer. They are able to handle changes of address and reports of missing checks. If a claim has been recently filed and has not yet been set up on the computer system, you will be referred to the local district office where the claim is being handled. That phone number is given to you, at the time you filed your initial application, on the receipt form that the SSA gives everyone who files a claim. The Teleservice Centers can also provide general information about Social Security, although it is recommended that you speak with a claims representative if the question is more involved.

### **District Office Telephone Service**

Many district offices have telephone services available to file claims, to report changes of address or missing checks, and to obtain information regarding Social Security. Almost all business you may have with the Social Security office can be

handled over the telephone. You can even file a claim over the phone. Many district offices have what is referred to as a *teleclaims unit*. These units are staffed by claims representatives who will obtain the necessary information from you over the phone, complete the application form, and mail it to you for your review and signature.

### **SOCIAL SECURITY TIP**

**It is against the policy of many Social Security offices to send out blank application forms.**

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If you call them up to file a claim, you will have to give the information over the phone so that the claims representative can properly fill out the application. This is done to ensure that there is no misunderstanding of information and that all the information and required evidence is obtained.

## SECTION 104 **INTERNET WEBSITE**

The official Social Security website is found at [www.ssa.gov](http://www.ssa.gov). It is comprehensive with many links. You can get a benefit estimate, request a statement of your Social Security record, and even apply for most type of benefits online. You can quickly get access to research data and reports, forms, program rules, regulations, statutes, and rulings. You can even put in your zip code and find the nearest field office.

You must be fairly comfortable working with computers and the Internet to take advantage of these services. Because the official website is so comprehensive, many users may be overwhelmed.

**Example:** A search for “amount of benefits” returns over fifteen pages of results, each with twenty links to administrative rulings, actuarial data, projections of replacements rates, and much more information that is very useful to sophisticated users.

Because so much information is available, it may take some time and effort to hone in on just what you are looking for.

**NOTE:** *There is a separate website for Medicare information found at [www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov)*

### **SOCIAL SECURITY TIP**

For those who are looking for quicker access to basic information in the format in which this book is arranged, visit the online version at:  
**[www.socialsecuritybenefitshandbook.com](http://www.socialsecuritybenefitshandbook.com)**

## SECTION 105 FIELD OFFICES

There are over 1,300 district and branch offices throughout the United States. Each district or branch office is responsible for dealing with all members of the public who reside in that district. Any business you may have to conduct with the SSA will be done through your local district office. You may determine where your district office is located by looking in the telephone

book under “United States Government, Social Security Administration,” by calling the nationwide toll-free number, or by going online. You may deal with any district office you prefer. District offices are open during regular business hours, but the exact times of opening and closing change from one office to another. Some offices open at 8:00 a.m. and close at 4:30 p.m., while other offices open at 8:30 a.m. and close at 5:00 p.m. Most of your business with the Social Security Administration can be conducted over the telephone or online.

### **SOCIAL SECURITY TIP**

**If you wish to visit your district office in person, usually you *cannot* make an appointment. Visitors at the district office are taken on a first-come, first-served basis.**

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### **Visiting the District Office**

The volume of visitors to district offices usually follows a pattern. Generally speaking, you are better off going to your district office towards the end of a month. The first week to ten days is usually the busiest. It is at these times that you may encounter a wait of an hour or more. The latter part of the week is typically less busy than the early part of the week—Mondays are usually very busy, whereas Fridays are slow.

The district offices are normally busy during lunchtime. This is because many people who work go there during their own lunchtime, while at the same time the Social Security employees have to eat, too. Interviewers at the Social Security office



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