



Records Preservation & Access Committee

Federation of Genealogical Societies, National Genealogical Society,
International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies

RPAC Talking Points on Why Genealogists Need the Social Security Death Index (SSDI)

Currently, four bills are pending in the US Congress that would eliminate or curtail access to the Social Security Death Index on the Internet. These bills are:

- HR 3475, *Keeping IDs Safe Act of 2011* <http://tinyurl.com/6uwu4aw>
(If enacted, this bill would effectively end public access to the death file)
- S 1534, the Identity Theft and Tax Fraud Prevention Act <http://tinyurl.com/75de8o9> (If enacted, this bill prohibits disclosure of the deceased's SSN in calendar year of death and calendar year following death)
- HR 3482 To prevent identity theft and tax crimes. <http://tinyurl.com/83p4b4p>
(If enacted, this bill prohibits disclosure of the deceased's SSN in calendar year of death and calendar year following death)
- HR 3215 To prevent identity theft and tax fraud <http://tinyurl.com/7fgsd5s>
(If enacted, this bill prohibits disclosure of the deceased's SSN in calendar year of death and calendar year following death)

For background information on the SSDI issue go to:

http://iajgs.org/jgscv/pdf/Venturing_V7_N4.pdf see pages 9-11

- Genealogists support Congress's intent to protect Americans from improper usage of their personal information, and to protect them from identity theft.
- Rarely, has it been documented that an individual's identity is violated by access to SSDI; rather, the violations occur due to computer breaches from government and private enterprises. A 2009 study stated "in the last five years, approximately 500 million records containing personal identifying information of United States residents stored in government and corporate databases was [sic] either lost or stolen"¹. Many of these computer breaches have been well documented in the press.²
- Genealogists doing US research located both in and outside the United States rely on the Social Security Death Index (SSDI), which is the commercial name of the Death Master File (DMF). The Death Master File is a computer database file made available by the United States Social Security Administration since 1980.
- SSDI is a deterrent to identity theft. As posted on the National Technical Information Service (NTIS) website (<http://tinyurl.com/yb6e49e>), it states, that the Death Master File (SSDI is the commercial name of this list) prevents identity fraud, as it verifies a person's death. In addition to family history researchers, the SSDI is used by credit reporting agencies, merchants, private investigators looking for missing heirs in probates, media reporters, university researchers, and others.

- Genealogy is a hobby for millions of people.

A study from May 2009³ characterizes those individuals interested in genealogy as follows:

49 million feel a deep appreciation for their ancestors*

13 million are active researchers**

More than 8.5 million visited genealogy-oriented sites in the last month (excluding search engines and long-tail sites).***

9 million are hobbyists**

1.6 million online adults 18-44 consider genealogy a hobby (3%)

7.5 million online adults 45+ report genealogy a hobby (8%)

A total of 9.1 million total hobbyists (out of an online universe of 148 million 18+)

- Genealogy also is a serious profession.
- Genealogists use the SSNs to appropriately identify records of people when tracing **family medical history**, especially if the person has a common name: Sara Cohen, Tom Brown, Jose Martinez, Trung Lee, etc. Genealogy assists in tracing family medical problems that are passed on from generation to generation. Information included in birth, marriage, and death records is critical to reconstructing families and tracing genetically inherited attributes in current family members. The SSN is critical to make certain that one has the correct person.. Increasing numbers of physicians are requesting that their patients provide a “medical family tree” in order to more quickly identify conditions common within the family⁴. Information on three generations is the suggested minimum. The US Surgeon General includes preparing a family medical history as part of the American Family Health Initiative⁵.
- Genealogists work with coroners to find next of kin for the deceased. The identities of these people are known, but the government agencies are not always able to find the families, so they are literally unclaimed. It is a national problem with which coroners must cope. See unclaimedpersons.org
- Genealogists work with military to locate relatives of soldiers who are still unaccounted for from past conflicts. While using DNA, the genealogists also need SSNs to help assure they are finding the correct person’s family. ⁶
- Other stakeholders who are concerned and want full and immediate access to the SSDI include: the financial and insurance industries [they need the information timely so that they can verify deaths to pay out death claims and verify beneficiaries for paying retiree benefits]; federal, state and local law enforcement agencies; Lexis-Nexis; charities legacy departments and planned gifts departments, medical researchers [tracking morbidity cluster deaths and tracking mortality of medical trial results]; state, county government and teacher retirement funds; county assessment offices, student loan companies; universities for student loans, tracing alumni mortalities and other activities, enhanced collections department of state courts, and other stakeholders that we are learning about daily.
- Check the RPAC website <http://www.fgs.org/rpac/index.php> frequently for the latest news. Keep in touch with RPAC and let us know what you are doing, including contacting your Congressional representatives.

To obtain **your** Congressional representatives addresses or find out whom your representative is go to:

U.S. Senators: http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm

U.S. Representatives: <http://www.house.gov/representatives/>

To contact the authors of the above bills:

Due to security precautions taken by the U.S. House of Representatives, outside mail is delayed 7-10 days; therefore, whenever possible, you may also consider faxing your letter(s)

(HR 3475) Representative Sam Johnson (R-TX)
U.S. House of Representatives
1211 Longworth Building
Washington, D.C. 20515
Phone: (202) 225-4201

(HR 3482, HR 3215) Representative Kathy Castor (D-FL)
U.S. House of Representatives
137 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
Phone: (202)225-3376
Fax: (202)225-5652

(HR 3215) Representative Richard Nugent (R-FL)
U.S. House of Representatives
1517 Longworth HOB
Washington, DC 20515
Phone: (202) 225-1002
Fax: (202) 226-6559

For all of above bills:

House Ways and Means Committee—(Majority)
Subcommittee on Social Security
B 317 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Tel: 202-225-3625 and ask to be transferred to Subcommittee on Social Security
e-mail: Jessica.Cameron@mail.house.gov

Fax: 202-225-2610 (this is for full committee so need to note for subcommittee-best to use e-mail here)

House Ways and Means Committee—(Minority)
Subcommittee on Social Security
1106 Longworth Building
Washington, DC 20515
Tel: 202-225-4021
Fax: 202-226-2520

(HR 3482 only)

House Judiciary Committee (Majority)
Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security.
B 352 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
Tel: 202-225-5741
Fax: 202-225-3672

House Judiciary Committee (Minority)
Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security.
B 336 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
Tel: 202-225-6906
Fax: 202-225-1845

Due to security precautions taken by the U.S.Senate, outside mail is delayed 7-10 days; therefore, whenever possible, you may also consider faxing your letter(s)

- (SB 1534)** Senator Bill Nelson (D-FL)
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716 Hart Senate Office Building
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- (SB 1534)** Senator Sherrod Brown (D-OH)
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Tel: 202- 224-2315
Fax: 202-228-6321
- (SB 1534)** Senator Richard J. Durbin (D-IL)
U.S. Senate
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Fax: 202-228-0400
- (SB 1534)** Senator Debbie Stabenow (D-MI)
U.S. Senate
133 Hart Senate Office Building
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Tel: 202-224-4822
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Senate Committee on Finance
Subcommittee on Taxation and IRS Oversight
219 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-6200
Majority staff: 202-224-4515 Tom Klauda
Minority Staff: 202-228-0554 Jeff Wrase
Fax: 202-228-0554.

¹. <http://www.identitytheft.info/breaches09.aspx>

².

http://www.boston.com/business/articles/2008/03/18/grocer_hannaford_hit_by_computer_breach/
http://www.nctimes.com/news/local/article_3b98ce38-f048-597e-9a76-47321d114326.html
http://www.gctimes.com/news/local/article_06d38e24-146a-11df-91c6-001cc4c03286.html

³. *MRI, May 2009 "Respect for ancestors is very important", **@Plan, May 2009 "Researched family history online in last 30 days" and "Hobbies = genealogy", ***Comscore Media Metrix, Mar 2009, Heat maps are @Plan, May 2008

⁴. Mayo Clinic staff: "Medical History: Compiling your medical family tree,"
<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/medical-history/HQ01707;>

⁵. <https://familyhistory.hhs.gov/fhh-web/home.action>

⁶. <http://www.aarp.org/relationships/genealogy/info-06-2011/genealogy-tips.html>