

Verification and Validation of Data

We remain committed to providing data that are valid and reliable for those who use it in decisionmaking. We continuously improve the reliability of data through internal management controls and in response to insights provided by interest groups such as the Agency's Inspector General (IG) and the General Accounting Office (GAO).

Annual Performance Plan: The Annual Performance Plan (APP) is the principal GPRA document for describing how we verify and validate the performance data we collect and report. Part IV of the APP includes historical data and annual targets for each Performance Indicator, as well as the data sources and definitions. If/when there are data weaknesses, we discuss efforts to correct/address such weaknesses. When performance indicators and goals cannot be quantified, descriptive statements tell how we consider the goal to have been achieved.

SSA Data Integrity Systems and Controls: Performance data for the APP's quantifiable measures, including the budgeted output measures, are generated by automated management information and workload measurement systems, as a by-product of routine operations. The performance data for several accuracy and public satisfaction indicators comes from surveys and workload samples designed to achieve very high levels (usually 95 percent confidence level) of statistical validity.

The Office of Quality Assurance and Performance Assessment (OQA) performs stewardship reviews that have been the mainstay reports on the quality of the Title II and Title XVI programs for many years, and this review will continue to be the primary measure of quality for Agency performance. Stewardship review findings provide the basis for reports to Congress and other monitoring authorities. The review provides an overall accuracy measurement of payments to all beneficiaries currently on the rolls. It is based on a monthly sample selection from the payment rolls consisting of beneficiaries in current payment status. For each sampled case, the recipient or representative payee is interviewed, collateral contacts are made as needed, and all factors of eligibility are redeveloped as of the current sample month.

OQA is no longer able to perform the traditional Index Dollar Accuracy reviews in sufficient volume to provide data that are valid at the regional level. OQA has been testing a new protocol to provide more current and useable quality feedback on recently adjudicated OASI/SSI claims and SSI redeterminations. The new evaluation methodology (Targeted Assessment Reviews) focuses on Field Office/Program Service Center quality and relies on the adjudication procedures as defined by the Program Operations Manual System instructions. This information will be useful as a means to achieving long-term solutions.

Program Performance Report: The annual Performance and Accountability Report (PAR) is the vehicle for reporting progress in meeting GPRA goals. The FY 2002 PAR describes the Agency's comprehensive review program of management and security controls for 1) administrative and programmatic processes, and 2) accounting controls in financial management systems.

Also discussed are the results of the audit of the FY 2002 financial statements and internal controls by PricewaterhouseCoopers, the independent accounting firm. Such reviews and assessments ensure that systems are secure and not vulnerable to manipulation by intruders, and confirm confidence in the reliability of performance data.

Roles of the Inspector General (IG) and the General Accounting Office (GAO):

The IG and the GAO play key roles in assuring that data systems for measuring performance are reliable, and that data are useful and relevant to policy decisionmaking. The IG evaluates the processes and systems being used to measure progress in goal achievement to assure that they provide reasonable assessments of performance. In FY 2001, the IG reviewed the performance measures in our FY 2000 Performance and Accountability Report (PAR) and FY 2001 Annual Performance Plan. They reported that “SSA’s FY 2001 APP represents SSA’s strong commitment and evolving progress to meet the objectives of GPRA. The APP responds to many of the criticisms about previous plans”. We enjoy a collaborative relationship with the IG and to this end we were able to develop an audit plan for FY 2002 that is mutually beneficial.

The IG uses a four-point approach to reviewing our performance measures. They are:

1. Assess SSA’s system capacity to produce performance data;
2. Assess whether reported performance measure data are valid;
3. Ensure that SSA has the appropriate measures to indicate the vitality of its programs; and
4. Ensure that the performance measures fully capture the program segments they are intended to capture.

For several years, the IG has identified SSA’s management of the Earnings Suspense File (ESF) as a Major Management Challenge and recommended that a performance measure be developed to monitor progress in reducing the size and growth of the ESF. In this FY 2004 APP, we have developed a performance indicator to reduce the percent of earnings that cannot be posted to individual’s records (and must therefore be accreted to the ESF). By establishing this external GPRA measure, this will also satisfy the PriceWaterhouseCoopers’ recommendation to provide the public and Congress with better information about the state of the ESF. This information can assist Congress and SSA in monitoring the status of un-posted wages.

The GAO identified “*Major Performance and Accountability Challenges*” for the Social Security Administration for FY 2003; they are to:

1. Strengthen the integrity of the SSI program;
2. Improve programs that provide support for individuals with disabilities;
3. Better position SSA for future service delivery challenges, including information technology; and
4. Strengthen controls to protect the personal information SSA develops and maintains.

Performance measures and strategies that address each of these challenges are included in this APP. In the above mentioned report, the GAO noted that because of the steps SSA has taken to strengthen its research, evaluation and policy development activities, this issue was removed as a separate management challenge. This success demonstrates the Agency’s commitment to be more responsive to recommendations from the IG and the GAO. We are in the process of performing a comprehensive review of all audit recommendations and will either implement them or provide a rationale for not implementing them.

Coordinated Agency Evaluation Plan: Each fiscal year, we develop a coordinated Agency Evaluation Plan. Components involved in evaluation, including the OIG, conduct a joint review of evaluation work plans to assure an appropriate match between planned evaluation activities and Agency priorities. They identify and address any information gaps and eliminate any overlap or duplication.