

Sunshine in Government Initiative

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The Honorable Sam Johnson
Chairman
Subcommittee on Social Security
Committee on Ways and Means
1129 Longworth Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Social Security
Committee on Ways and Means
1139E Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: Submission of media coalition written comments on February, 2, 2012, “Hearing on Social Security Administration’s Death Records.”

February 16, 2012

Dear Chairman Johnson and Ranking Member Becerra,

We are writing add a media perspective on the public uses of information in the Social Security Administration’s Death Master File (DMF). **The Sunshine in Government Initiative** is a coalition of media associations promoting government transparency.

We request our statement be included in the record of the February 2, 2012, hearing entitled, “Hearing on Social Security Administration’s Death Records.” In its efforts to address concerns about identity theft, Congress should preserve the availability of information that reporters have for decades used to inform the public about important issues.

First, we commend the Committee for holding the public hearing on proposed changes to public access to the Death Master File. Too often decisions affecting what the public can find out from and about their government are made without adequate public discussion. When there is public debate, frequently it occurs late in the legislative process. Early public discussion about any proposal to add to the more than 240 laws already on the books that limit FOIA’s reach serves the public well, and we appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this discussion.

Journalists have used the DMF in a number of stories that contributed to the public interest. Here are some examples:

- In 2005, the Birmingham News used the Death Master File to identify factory employees add a human element to a story on factory workers in an investigation of asbestos exposure and mesothelioma.
- Dead people are listed on voter rolls and some voted in 2003, *The Times of Northwest Indiana* showed dead people still listed on voter rolls. This case is not isolated. Years

earlier, also using the Death Master File, the Ashbury Park Press in September 25, 1994 reported dead people voting in Ocean City, New Jersey.

- The Scripps-Howard News Service documented the red tape nightmare facing relatives of dead people whose identities are stolen using the Death Master File. Scripps-Howard presented the issues without publishing the social security numbers themselves.

Any adjustments to public access to the DMF should allow journalists' continued responsible use of the Death Master File to inform the public. We recognize the concern about preventing thieves from using the DMF to falsely claim tax deductions. At the same time, access to the information in the Death Master File is vital to keeping the public informed. We believe it may be possible to address concerns about identity theft while preserving public access to the Death Master File, such as instituting a brief delay on release of DMF data on individuals who can be claimed as dependents on tax returns.

We look forward to working with you to ensure public access to a vital source of information widely used to keep the public informed about issues we care about.
Thank you again for the opportunity to present these views.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rick Blum". The signature is written in black ink and has a long, sweeping tail that extends to the right.

Rick Blum
Coordinator