

These are written comments associated with the February 2, 2012 Hearing on Social Security's Death Records. They are justification for retaining the SSDI information on the Internet and readily available to citizens. I am a strong advocate for protecting privacy, but in this case the advantages of retaining the SSDI information on the Internet far outweigh the disadvantages.

- 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://www.ntis.gov/products/ssa-dmf.aspx>), 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 www.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.

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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.qctimes.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>