

January 30, 2012

Keith B. Riggle  
304 Briar Ln  
Morris IL 60450

Chairman Sam Johnson  
United States House of Representatives  
House Ways and Means Committee  
Subcommittee on Social Security  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Subject: Hearing on Social Security's Death Records

Dear Chairman Johnson:

I would like to tell you how I, as a genealogist and family historian, use the Social Security Administration's Death Master File (aka Social Security Death Index [SSDI]).

I use the SSDI to appropriately identify records of people when tracing my family history, especially if the person has a common name. The SSDI is especially helpful in constructing family medical histories. There are several inheritable diseases in my family, including diabetes and Parkinson's disease. 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 Social Security Number is critical to make certain that I have 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 family (1). 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 Initiative (2).

I support Congress's intent to protect Americans from improper usage of their personal information and to protect them from identity theft. However, denying the millions of Americans who engage in genealogy access to the SSDI is not the answer. 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” (3). The SSDI is actually 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) 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. The IRS should use the SSDI to identify fraudulent tax returns.

The Records Preservation and Access Committee of the Federation of Genealogical Societies, National Genealogical Society, and International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies has presented you with a position paper on this subject. As an individual genealogist, I fully support their position and recommendations.

Keith B. Riggle

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- (1) Mayo Clinic staff: "Medical History: Compiling your medical family tree," <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/medical-history/HQ01707>
  - (2) <https://familyhistory.hhs.gov/fhh-web/home.action>
  - (3) <http://www.identitytheft.info/breaches09.aspx>

Supplemental Sheet: Contact Information (not for the record)

Name: Keith B. Riggle

Organization (if applicable): None

Address: 304 Briar Ln, Morris IL 60450

Phone Number: 573-340-3884

Contact E-mail Address: keith.riggle@mac.com

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