



## NATIONAL GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

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### **STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD, HOUSE COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS, SUBCOMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SECURITY, WRITTEN COMMENTS ON PROVISIONS RELATING TO SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION'S DEATH MASTER FILE.**

#### I. INTRODUCTION

House Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Social Security held a Hearing on 2 February 2012, regarding the accuracy and uses of the Social Security Administration's Death Master File. No one from the genealogical community was invited to testify at the hearing, but we were invited to submit a written statement. This statement is submitted on behalf of the National Genealogical Society.

#### II. BACKGROUND ON THE NATIONAL GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY AND CONTACT INFORMATION:

The National Genealogical Society (NGS) is a non-profit Virginia corporation, founded in 1903 and has approximately 9,000 individual members and 650 organizational subscribers which include regional, state, and local societies. Although our membership includes many professional genealogists, most of our members are people actively researching their own families. All officers and directors serve as volunteers and receive no compensation for performing their duties.

The mission of the National Genealogical Society is to serve and grow the genealogical community by providing education and training, fostering increased quality and standards, and promoting access to and preservation of genealogical records.

The genealogical community works together through The Records Preservation and Access Committee (RPAC), a joint committee which today includes The National Genealogical Society (NGS), the Federation of Genealogical Societies (FGS), and the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS) as voting members. The Association of Professional Genealogists (APG), the Board for Certification of Genealogists (BCG), and the American Society of Genealogists (ASG) also serve as participating members. RPAC also includes participation from a few of the commercial providers of genealogical information. RPAC meets monthly to advise the genealogical community on ensuring proper access to vital records, and on supporting strong records preservation policies and practices.

Contact information: Janet A. Alpert, National Genealogical Society, 3108 Columbia Pike, Suite 300, Arlington, Virginia, 22204-4304, telephone 703-525-0050, fax 703-525-0052, and email [janalpert@aol.com](mailto:janalpert@aol.com). Janet A. Alpert is a member of the National Genealogical Society board of directors, immediate past president, and served two terms as president from 1 October 2006

through 30 September 2010. She previously served one term as secretary from 2004 through 2006. Ms. Alpert has a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Political Science from the University of California, Santa Barbara, California, and a Masters in Business Administration from the University of Connecticut. She retired in 2004 from a thirty-five year career in the title insurance industry, and now resides in Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. Ms. Alpert is an amateur genealogist who has been researching her family for over thirty years.

### III. OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUES

The Social Security Administration's Death Master File (DMF) is a publicly available resource of great value to both family history researchers and professional genealogists. Genealogists use a commercial version of the product called the Social Security Death Index (SSDI). The SSDI has been available to the public since the Consent Judgment, *Perholtz v. Ross*, No. Civ. 78-2385, Dist. D. C. (April 3, 1980).

Genealogy is different than the other social sciences where researchers draw their conclusions from a broad overview of the available records. Genealogists study specific individuals—their ancestors. Therefore if a genealogist does not have access to the records about the ancestor they are researching, their work may come to an abrupt halt.

I am writing on behalf of the National Genealogical Society, its members, and organizational subscribers about why family history researchers and professional genealogists need access to the Social Security Death Index (SSDI).

1. Many genealogists begin researching their family because there is a part of their family they never knew. The estrangement may have occurred because of adoption, divorce, abandonment, death, or other reasons. Regardless of the cause, learning about an unknown branch of the family helps the healing process. The SSDI has been an essential tool for genealogists looking for relatives who were born in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

From the earliest settlements in America, we have been people on the move, generally migrating west in search of cheaper land and better opportunities. Since Vital Records are kept by state, without the SSDI, no national index will be available to determine where people might have moved. Information contained in the SSDI includes the state where the social security number was initially issued and the social security number, which helps genealogists determine if this is the actual person they are researching. After finding the person in the SSDI, the researcher often writes to the Social Security Administration, OEO FOIA Workgroup, P.O. Box 33022, Baltimore, Maryland 21290-3022 for a copy of the original Social Security application form, called the SS-5. The SS-5 contains valuable information for family history researchers including full name at birth including maiden name, date and place of birth, current address, and full name of father and mother. The SS-5 is necessary if you are researching someone with a common

name, to make sure you identify the correct parents. The researcher pays a fee of \$27 for a copy of the SS-5, and a fee of \$29.00 if we do not have the Social Security number.

2. Another use of the SSDI is to find the date of death and location of the person you are researching so you can look for an obituary. Many recent obituaries are available online, but many older obituaries are on microfilm and obtained by writing the local library for a copy. Librarians cannot do an extensive search, but can usually find an obituary if they have the death date. An obituary normally identifies living and deceased relatives, the married names of daughters, and the current cities of residence which is essential information.
3. A third use of the SSDI is to find siblings and cousins when a family carries a disease which can be inherited. In these instances time is of the essence. The first step is to find the aunt or uncle, or great aunt or uncle in the SSDI, and then follow the procedure in (III. 2.) above to locate their obituary. Finding and notifying distant cousins can mean the difference between early detection and treatment versus possible death.

Each year since 2004, the Surgeon General (see <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov>) has declared Thanksgiving to be “National Family History Day.” When families are together over the holidays or at other gatherings, the Surgeon General encourages families to discuss and write down the health problems that appear to run in their family and to share the information with their family doctor. The Health and Human Services website <http://www.hhs.gov/familyhistory/> provides a “My Family Health Portrait” tool for families to record their health history information.

Diseases residing in estranged branches of the family as described in paragraph III.1. above are sometimes the silent killers. Parents of adopted children are given the health history of the biological parents. However, since the biological parents are often under the age of thirty-years old, sometimes there are few health risks disclosed. If you could ask those same parents about their health history fifty years later, after their parents have died, the answer would be more complete. Therefore it is important for people who are adopted to first identify and then reach out to their biological parents and siblings after they reach adulthood.

4. Professional genealogists need access to the SSDI to continue their livelihood. You can learn more about the Association of Professional Genealogists (APG) which has over 2,000 members in the United States at <http://www.apgen.org/about/index.html>. In addition to helping clients discover their family history, many professional genealogists have important specialties.
  - a. Some professional genealogists work in the field of forensic genealogy. Working with the military they help find the families of servicemen lost in previous military conflicts to assist in the repatriation of the remains.
  - b. Others work with county coroners to identify the relatives of unclaimed persons.

- c. Some clients include attorneys who need to find missing heirs to settle estate cases.
- d. Other genealogists specialize in finding the living biological parents or siblings of someone who was adopted.

It has been suggested that professional genealogists could use LexisNexis for their research in lieu of the SSDI. Subscriptions to LexisNexis are cost prohibitive for self-employed professionals. The cost to provide the above professional services will go up if the SSDI is no longer available in the future.

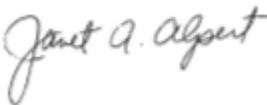
#### IV. SOLUTIONS AVAILABLE TO SOLVE IDENTITY THEFT OF DECEASED INDIVIDUALS

Genealogists are also opposed to identity theft and support efforts to stop it. We believe the current laws and regulations provide a means to stop identity theft RIGHT NOW, if government agencies use tools which are already available.

1. If income tax returns were electronically compared to the Master Death File, the income tax return of a deceased individual could be flagged for special processing, thus thwarting the person attempting to create a tax fraud before the fraud occurs.
2. The SSNs of parents should be required when filing a tax return for any minor. If the minor dies, the IRS could have a procedure to flag any filings without the parents' social security numbers, again preventing attempts at fraud.
3. The National Taxpayer Advocate's report for 2011 specifically highlights the benefits of the IRS Issued Identity Protection PINs and suggests that taxpayers should be allowed to turn off their ability to file tax returns electronically. When there is a death in the family, the executor needs the ability to turn off the electronic filing ability.

We feel strongly that the hearing on 2 February 2012 incorrectly portrayed genealogists as the cause of fraud. By not inviting a representative from the genealogical community to testify, you failed to allow an open discussion on the real causes of tax fraud and constructive ways to prevent it. We appreciate the opportunity to present our positions to the subcommittee.

Sincerely,



Janet A. Alpert  
Immediate Past President of the  
National Genealogical Society and  
NGS Representative on RPAC