

Social Security Number (SSN) Reduction

This fact sheet details ongoing efforts to enhance the privacy and security of Veterans and their beneficiaries and VA employees.

Less is More: Protecting Privacy by Limiting the Collection and Use of SSNs at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is committed to safeguarding Veterans' and employees' privacy by reducing or eliminating the use of Social Security numbers in records, unless required by law or business needs.

VA's SSN Reduction Initiative is an ongoing program initiated by the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) 2007 Memorandum 07-16: "Safeguarding Against and Responding to the Breach of Personally Identifiable Information."

How VA Restricts Use of SSNs

VA's compliance with OMB Memo 07-16 is guided by VA Directive 6507, which requires VA's three Administrations and staff offices to inventory their SSN collections and uses, develop an SSN reduction action plan, and submit updates and implementation plans. Once the inventories are complete, the Administrations and staff offices establish priorities and detail remediation and action plans.

The goal is to reduce or eliminate SSNs, except when required by law (background investigations, security checks, validation processes) as an attribute of unique identification, or as a backup identifier.

Actions in VA's SSN Reduction Efforts

VA has taken the following actions to reduce or eliminate SSN use:

- » **Use unique identifiers.** VA maintains a system that provides Veterans with an Integration Control Number, which is a unique identifier assigned to each patient entry. This links patients to their records across VA systems, and reduces use of SSNs.
- » **Create an SSN reduction tool.** VA's Office of Information and Technology (OIT) has developed a VA SSN reduction tool to create an inventory of SSN usage. The tool has been tested and will be ready for use in March 2018 by the Veterans Benefits Administration, National Cemetery Administration and program offices.
- » **Eliminate SSN use in eBenefits access.** VA has worked to ensure that the VA eBenefits portal — the VA/Department of Defense secure online benefits-application site — allows Veterans to access their personal information with a user name and password instead of an SSN.
- » **Change identification cards.** In early 2014, VA removed SSNs from the electronic medium on the Veteran Health Identification Card and replaced it with an internal identifier.



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- » **Review System of Records Notices (SORNs) annually.** VA conducts annual reviews to update and republish its Privacy Act SORNs, which are files, databases or programs that can retrieve personal information by name or unique identifiers. These reviews ensure that SORNs are current or communicate changes or updates.

Ongoing Efforts to Reduce VA's SSN Use

VA takes the following steps to monitor, reduce or eliminate SSN use:

- » **Monitor patient identifiers.** VA works to ensure that the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) replaces SSNs on human readable displays within the barcodes in software, hardware and systems so that patients' wristbands display their unique patient identifiers instead of their SSNs.

- » **Evaluate patient information.** VHA evaluates and revises (as appropriate) current policies to manage patient identity verification, prescription labels, mailing labels, several forms and most appointment letters to reduce use of SSNs.
- » **Eliminate forms.** VA continues to eliminate unused forms that require SSNs and reevaluate the need for SSNs on all of its remaining forms. National forms — and local forms not scanned into the health record — are reviewed to determine if the full SSN can be reduced to the last four digits of the SSN or eliminated.

More Information

For more information on VA's SSN Reduction Initiative, visit www.oprm.va.gov/privacy or email us at privacyservice@va.gov.

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