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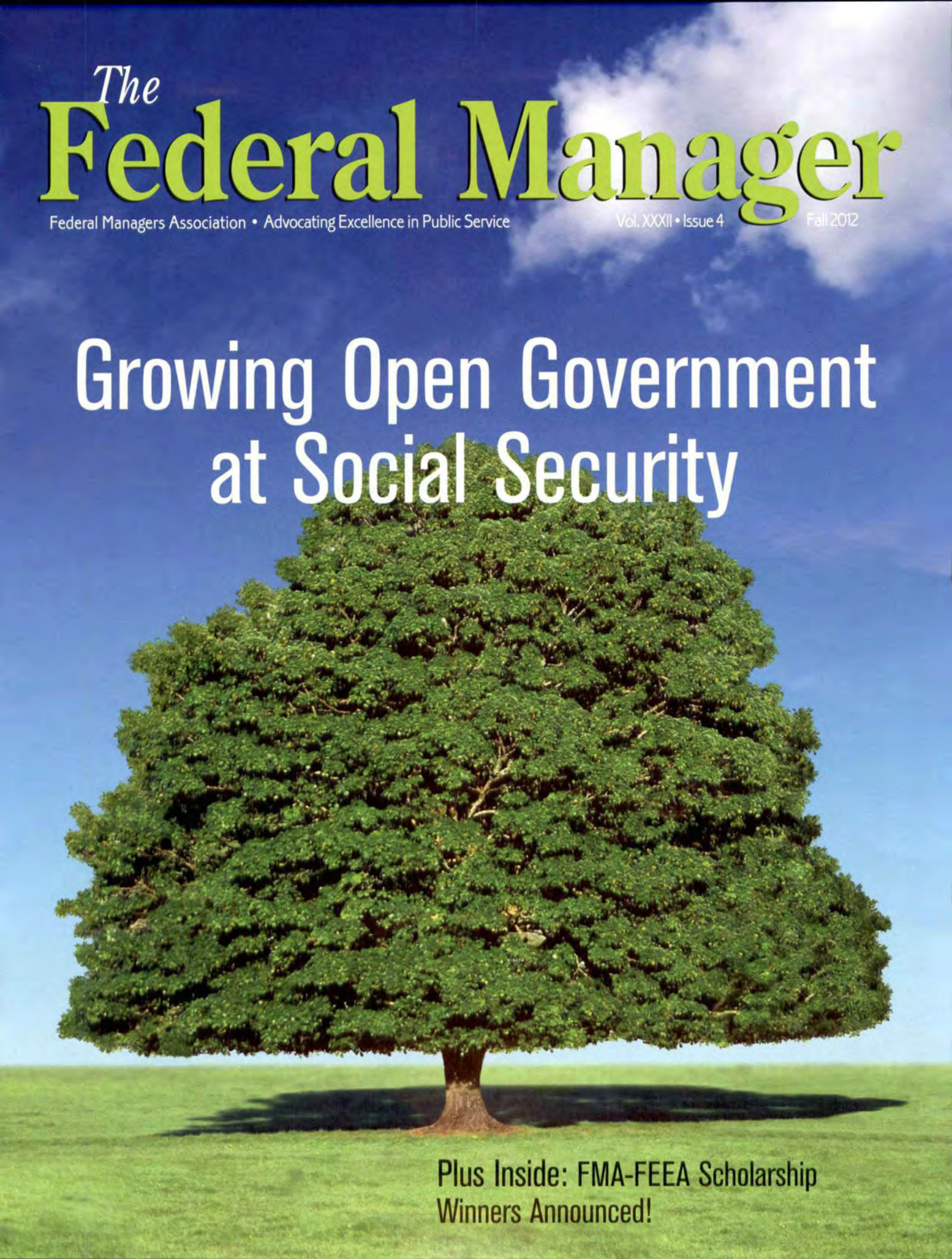
Growing Open Government at Social Security



Plus Inside: FMA-FEEA Scholarship Winners Announced!

Growing Open Government at Social Security

"In all parts of the world, we see the promise of innovation to make government more open and accountable. And now, we must build on that progress."

— President Barack Obama

By Office of Open Government, Social Security Administration

The Social Security Administration (SSA) embraced the challenge of open government early on, developing and implementing its first Open Government Plan[1] in 2010. "Social Security has always valued transparency and sought to give the public user-friendly information about our programs," Michael J. Astrue, Commissioner of Social Security, said at the time. "I look forward to engaging Americans in the business of their government."

The first iteration of SSA's Open Government Plan focused primarily on three "flagship" initiatives, including an online Spanish Retirement Estimator, which was the Agency's first non-English online service; a new service-channeling capability on the agency website, to help people more easily find the information and services they seek; and an online Life Expectancy Calculator to help people make more informed choices about when to collect retirement benefits.

Other key milestones from the 2010 plan included acquisition of new media technologies and other tools and forums to engage the American public more fully in a dialogue about SSA's programs and services.

To build on the success of its first plan, SSA released "Open Government Plan 2.0" in April 2012. This refreshed plan is wide-ranging and comprehensive, introducing new efforts and building on others that are already underway.

Improving Transparency

At the outset of the Open Government Initiative, SSA joined other federal agencies in creating a dedicated web portal highlighting information and activities that advance openness and accountability. SSA's Open Government portal[2] offers information about the agency's overall management and organizational structure while providing a forum for submitting comments, questions, ideas, or concerns about SSA's programs and services. The last three years have seen numerous enhancements to the portal, as part of a continuing emphasis on plain and transparent communication. "We frequently update and expand information on this page, based on evolving issues, news events and comments from our employees and the public," said Alan Lane, the agency's Associate Commissioner for Open Government.

Data for the People

SSA also has taken steps to boost the availability of information it believes the public would consider high-value. "We have worked to increase transparency by making information available at Socialsecurity.gov and Data.gov, while still protecting personal information entrusted to us," said Jim Courtney, SSA's Deputy Commissioner for Communications. "In identifying data to share with the public, we look at the challenges facing the agency — such as eliminating disability claims backlogs, improving online services to meet increased public demand, and maintaining secure and reliable IT services and infrastructure — and publish data that could help people understand the services and programs we administer on their behalf. "

SSA developed a *Data Inventory and Plan for Releasing High-Value Data*,[3] which outlines a process for identifying data to release, and identifies datasets expected to be released in coming years. To date, the agency has published 38 new data sets focused on a variety of areas, including disability claims and hearings processes; online applications and services; benefits and earnings; and research studies. In addition to posting the data on its Open Government portal,[4] SSA has made them available on Data.gov.

Particularly popular are the datasets on Administrative Law Judges' dispositions of disability appeals and other hearing office workload counts. The agency team that manages the hearing and appeals data won an Open Government Honor

[1] http://ssa.gov/open/story-2010-06-24-open-government-plan.html
[2] http://ssa.gov/open/
[3] http://socialsecurity.gov/open/story-2010-09-30-data-inventory-release-plan.html
[4] http://ssa.gov/open/data/

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Award for its effort in publishing these high-value datasets. "The team's efforts reflect the true value of public data," said Lane, "fostering use that leads to greater agency accountability and responsiveness, and increased public knowledge of the agency and its operations. Importantly, the hearings and appeals datasets help claimants and their representatives prepare for their hearings and better understand the potential impacts, financial and otherwise."

SSA also established the Employment Network (EN) Report Card to support the agency's Ticket to Work Program (TTW), for which 13.2 million disability beneficiaries are eligible. As part of the TTW program, beneficiaries who wish to return to employment can work with an EN to develop a plan that best suits them. All ENs provide career counseling, job placement, and ongoing support services. To help people make informed decisions and choose ENs that best meet their needs, SSA posts yearly report cards on its website. The report cards list the services ENs offer, information they have reported about their experience and performance, the number of clients they serve, and how many people they have helped obtain and keep jobs. Beginning approximately mid-June 2012, the report cards also will include the ENs' customer satisfaction levels.

Other recent releases include survey data on overall customer service satisfaction regarding various service delivery channels, i.e., online, 800 number and office visits. SSA also posts information on state-by-state usage of the agency's 'Help America Vote'[5] verification process, by which it responds to state requests to verify Social Security Numbers for new voters who do not present a valid driver's license during the voter registration process.

Freedom of Information

SSA uses a centralized, automated approach to handling Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, which uses a browser-based platform and electronic communications about the status of pending requests. The eFOIA system has greatly improved SSA's ability to respond to FOIA requests in a timely manner. "We are enhancing our electronic FOIA 'reading room' to make searching and retrieving information previously requested by the public even easier," explained Dawn Wiggins, Acting Executive Director for Privacy and Disclosure. "We plan to proactively post frequently-requested information on the reading room site, to improve service as well as reduce requests for identical or similar material."

"*my* Social Security" — A Flagship Initiative

While striving for improved transparency and openness, SSA is also committed to ensuring that people can access their personal information online easily and securely.

On May 1, 2012, SSA launched the first online service to test the new "my Social Security" authentication protocol: the online *Social Security Statement*,[6] which provides online access to a popular information service that the public had become accustomed to receiving by mail. In less than two months, over one million people successfully created an online account and accessed their Social Security Statement, and already the service is getting high marks, scoring 88 in the latest American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) survey.

"The online Statement is a very useful financial planning tool," said Commissioner Astrue. "It provides estimates for retirement, disability and survivors benefits. It also provides workers a convenient way to determine whether their earnings are accurately posted to their Social Security records. This feature is important because Social Security benefits are based on average earnings over a person's lifetime. Now, people as young as 18 can access their Statement for the first time and also find links to important information and online services."

SSA is working on various other secure, personalized online services it can add to this gateway.

Expanding Public Participation

The 2012 SSA plan called for embracing new media technologies and platforms for successful direct engagement with the public. "Taking into account our diverse audience and constituency, we also need to ensure these platforms are accessible to those with disabilities," Alan Lane said. "We are making good progress in trying new venues and tools to bring the public into the conversation."

Social Media

Two years ago Social Security established a presence on Facebook[7] and Twitter,[8] helping the agency reach constituents quickly, disseminate relevant information effectively, and stay connected to the public. SSA also published Spanish Facebook[9] and Twitter[10] sites. The agency's YouTube[11] channel — which has been in place since 2007 — offers information through video presentations, with about 1350 subscribers and more than one-half million video views to date.

Webinars

SSA's embrace of social media has dovetailed nicely with its use of other online engagement tools, such as "web-based seminars," more commonly known as "webinars." Since early 2008, SSA produced nearly 30 webinars[12] to engage viewers across the nation and beyond, on topics ranging from applying online for retirement benefits to representative payee requirements to expedited claims services for the nation's wounded warriors. SSA also has successfully used webinars to reach thousands of web participants from non-traditional and often underserved audiences on topics of unique interest and relevance to these respective populations.

"In March 2011, we aired "Social

[5] http://ssa.gov/open/havv/
[6] http://socialsecurity.gov/mystatement/
[7] http://facebook.com/socialsecurity
[8] http://twitter.com/#!/socialsecurity
[9] http://facebook.com/segurosocial
[10] http://twitter.com/#!/segurosocial
[11] http://youtube.com/user/socialsecurityonline
[12] http://www.ssa.gov/webinars/

NAGC Gold Screen Award, accepting on behalf of Social Security Administration (from left to right) Dawn Bystry, Darlynda Bogle, Brian Simpson (host of webinar), Jennifer Lohr (NAGC President), and Mayela Gillette.

Security 101: What's in it for me?,"[13] said Alan Lane. "We sought to inform the younger generation about the benefits Social Security has to offer, in addition to retirement. Viewers received answers to such questions as "What's that FICA tax that comes out of my paycheck?" "How can Social Security help me at my age?," and "Why do I need to start planning now for my financial future?"

Nearly one thousand viewers connected to the live broadcast, including students and faculty at 66 colleges and universities. Hundreds of viewers participated in the interactive question-and-answer session at the end of the live presentation. Tens of thousands have viewed the recorded video on SSA's website and YouTube channel. In June 2012, SSA accepted a first-place "Gold Screen" award from the National Association of Government Communicators (NAGC) for this webinar. The NAGC,[14] a nonprofit professional network of federal, state, and local government employees, annually recognizes superior government communications products in multiple awards categories, including webcasts, videos, reports and posters.

Spanish Language Engagement

SSA has made its most popular online services -- the applications for retirement and Medicare, for Extra Help with Medicare prescription drug costs, and the online Retirement Estimator -- available in Spanish. To better inform the public about these services, the agency provided a Spanish webinar, entitled,"¡Servicios del Seguro Social por Internet - en Espanol!", held in February of this year. Hundreds of viewers connected with SSA for the live broadcast and participated in an interactive session to address questions. Several hundred more have viewed the recorded video online.

Online Ideation and Dialogue

To develop ideas for the content of its original and refreshed Open Government plans, and SSA's latest Agency Strategic Plan, the agency used an online engagement 'tool' on our Open Government portal. Before launching this online tool, SSA worked closely with the General Services Administration (GSA), which had negotiated for its use government-wide. Of particular note was the successful collaboration between SSA's "Section 508" team and GSA's own accessibility experts.

Both the public and agency employees posted their suggestions, shared comments on one another's ideas, and "voted" on the ideas of particular appeal. SSA used the input gathered from these dialogues to strengthen and refine its plans. "We will continue to use online collaboration for other targeted areas of program, policy or service delivery enhancement," said Lane.

Later this year, the agency plans to seek public input on its plans to revise outdated medical listings, and will use online ideation to gather public feedback before the Advance Notice of Proposed Rule Making (ANPRM) stage of the policy development process. Art Spencer, who manages SSA's Office of Disability Programs, said "this effort will refine our own thinking and planning, and help us evaluate and prioritize our actions going forward using a process that we also think will save us time."

In-Person Public Forums

Even as SSA pursues new media technologies for public engagement, the agency also retains traditional face-to-face interaction with stakeholders and other members of the public when formulating initiatives. One example is the Compassionate Allowances Program,[15] designed to help identify diseases and medical conditions so severe that they obviously meet Social Security disability standards. The program fast-tracks disability decisions to ensure that Americans with the most serious disabilities receive their benefit decisions within days instead of months or years. Under Commissioner Michael Astrue's leadership, SSA has held a series of public hearings with medical experts, advocates, and individuals interested in the disability process, to discuss and consider potential additional medical conditions. SSA boosted remote participation in these events through teleconferencing and webcast capabilities. To date, the Compassionate Allowances Program has yielded 166 medical conditions, ranging

[13] http://www.socialsecurity.gov/open/social-security-101-whats-in-it-for-me.html
[14] http://nagc.com/
[15] http://www.socialsecurity.gov/compassionateallowances/

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SSA: The Basics

SSA runs one of the nation's largest programs, delivering vital benefits to millions of people at critical points in their lives — retirement, disability, or after the passing of a loved one. The agency also administers the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, which provides financial support to aged, blind, or disabled adults and children with limited income and resources. In FY 2011, SSA paid more than 60 million people a total of about $770 billion in Social Security benefits and SSI payments.

Open Government Honor Award Winners, IdeaCAT Team (from left to right): Debi Gardiner, Eric Estes, Gale Nicholson, Chuck Wansor, Brandy Mershon, and Brittny Thompson.

from cancer to neurological and immune system disorders. "With our Compassionate Allowances program, we quickly approved disability benefits for nearly 61,000 people with severe disabilities in the past fiscal year [2011]," said Commissioner Astrue, "and nearly 173,000 applications since the program began."

SSA also meets periodically with representatives from many of the advocacy groups and other stakeholders, to provide updates on the implementation of the open government plan, and address questions and comments pertinent to their respective constituents.

Increasing Collaboration

Alan Lane says that "collaboration is a key element in Open Government, as it allows us to leverage the collective knowledge and talent from various public and private sector organizations, departments and industries. We continue to build innovative partnerships and use technology to expand the discussion and involvement of others."

Seeding Open Government from Within

Agency employees are key players in SSA's collaboration efforts. "We have made various efforts to get agency employees involved with open government," said Lane. He described one project in September 2010, in which the agency launched a tool called "IdeaCAT" based on lessons learned from the collaborative development of the agency's Electronic Claims Analysis Tool (eCAT), which documents the analysis of a disability case.

IdeaCAT is a web-based, crowd-sourcing tool that allows users — consisting mostly of front-line State employees in Disability Determination offices — to submit ideas for enhancements to the eCAT tool. IdeaCAT allows users to vote and comment on the ideas that others submit. SSA uses the feedback to prioritize actions to improve eCAT. The user community has actively participated in the process, with over 700 employees registered to use IdeaCAT. To date, more than 120 users have submitted 414 new ideas. Users have cast over 5,000

votes, and the IdeaCAT team has incorporated 51 ideas into eCAT. The IdeaCAT team received an Open Government Honor Award for its achievements in working extensively with the user community, generating buy-in, a sense of ownership of the tool, and a willingness to continue suggesting improvements.

Extra Help with Medicare Prescription Drugs

Working with Medicare advocates, SSA was able to develop and refine the application for Extra Help with Medicare Prescription Drug Costs.[16] The agency held discussions with advocates, as well as interviewed more than 30 prospective Medicare and Social Security recipients to improve the understandability of the language on the application. This online application continues to be among the highest in the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) survey, scoring 88 (or fourth among government online transactions) during the fourth quarter of 2011.

Health IT

Health Information Technology (Health IT) can reduce significantly the time it takes to obtain medical records needed to support disability determinations, as well as assist in managing information more efficiently. SSA has collaborated with medical associations, health privacy advocates, medical providers, and state and federal agencies to adapt Health IT in the work of our agency, to automate the request, response and processing of medical evidence. "SSA has positioned itself to take advantage of advances in Health IT and electronic health records to improve our processing of disability claims," said Debby Ellis, one of SSA's systems executives. "By enabling Social Security to obtain medical records more quickly and efficiently, Health IT has already demonstrated the potential to improve the service provided to the millions of Americans who turn to Social Security's disability programs for assistance."

By the end of FY 2012, SSA expects to expand the exchange of medical records through Health IT to various medical networks and providers to 13 States. In FY 2013, SSA plans to add two to three more medical providers, and connect with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Defense (DoD) on the Nationwide Health Information Network (NwHIN).

SSA cleared an important milestone on this initiative in late June 2012, with Kaiser Permanente, one of the nation's largest healthcare providers, committing to electronically transmit complete medical records for its patients to the agency, with the appropriate consent. SSA requests about 70,000 patient files from Kaiser Permanente each year, so this seamless new system will save time and money for both partners as well as allow SSA to make faster and more accurate decisions.

"I am confident that people will look back at [this] announcement as the most significant improvement in our disability determination process since the program began in 1956. In today's world it makes no sense for us to chase down paper records on an individual basis," said Commissioner Astrue. "We are thrilled that Kaiser Permanente is now one of our key agents for change."

Virtual Lifetime Electronic Records/Wounded Warrior

The goal of this initiative is to centralize requests for electronic medical records, thereby improving the transfer of medical information and helping to speed the processing of disability claims for wounded warriors.

SSA is using two different approaches to meet this objective. "In the near-term, we are using our existing data share technologies to exchange medical information," said Art Spencer. "State Disability Determination Services (DDS) sites, which process disability claims for SSA, can request electronic medical records from any DoD Medical Treatment Facility, using a single request to a centralized DoD site. We recently began nationwide expansion, which we expect to complete by the end of 2012. We are getting complete medical evidence in a much shorter time."

In the longer term, SSA will create a Health IT exchange pilot that uses the Nationwide Health Information Network to provide medical records from DoD and the Veterans Administration to SSA. DoD and VA will implement solutions to route patient authorizations for the release of protected health information that will meet the terms of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) Privacy Rule. SSA plans to begin this pilot by December 2012.

eAuthorization

Based on collaboration among SSA, health privacy advocates, and medical providers, as of April 2012, disability applicants can electronically "sign" medical release forms (SSA-827s) for their online claims. This enables them to complete the disability application process in a streamlined online session, eliminating the need to print, sign or mail paper forms to SSA offices. This leads to faster processing of disability claims.

By August 2012, SSA will provide an online authorization signature process for those who complete the SSA-827 as part of their online disability appeal. The agency also is researching options for obtaining electronic signatures from those who file claims either in person or over the telephone, and expects to explore alternatives for developing an online authorization process for third party filers by 2013.

What Does the Future Hold for SSA and Open Government?

SSA is proud of the great strides it has made towards becoming a more open organization. As it moves ahead with a refreshed plan, SSA will work to advance open government to support the agency's strategic mission and goals in the context of the limited resources available. ■

Please visit http://ssa.gov/open *to learn more about the Social Security Administration's Open Government Plan.*

[16] http://ssa.gov/prescriptionhelp/index.htm/