

## Physically Alive, Legally Dead

By: Catherine E. Sears

Did you know that the Social Security Administration can declare you legally dead, even if you are still very much alive? Every year, approximately 9,000 people are accidentally declared deceased, simply due to clerical error. Although this may initially sound like a silly conundrum akin to one of Tom Sawyer's adventures, this simple transposing of digits can have devastating effects on the individuals declared to be dead.

Take government benefits, for example. A person's Social Security payments, which may be a key source of his or her monthly income, can be interrupted as a result of being inaccurately declared dead. Additionally, government agencies talk to each other, so other organizations - like Medicare and the VA - that obtain their records from the Social Security Administration (SSA) may stop issuing benefits to the legally-deceased individual as well.

The headache doesn't end there. Part of the SSA's duties is to maintain what is called the "Death Master File." This public domain database lists basic identifying information of deceased individuals, including name, date of birth, address, and Social Security Number. Ironically, publishing the Death Master File is intended to prevent fraud to ensure, for example, that a person doesn't try to open a line of credit in his or her deceased relative's name. However, for people who are inaccurately declared deceased, the Death Master File can lead to rampant identity theft because their personal information has been compromised and has become part of the public record.

Awareness of this problem is especially important now. Last month, the SSA discovered a mass clerical error in their system, in which 90 people out of a group of 19,000, were declared legally dead. These 90 cases were concentrated in three states, including Virginia, and were part of a new system that the SSA was trying to implement in order to increase the quality of its death records.

The SSA has said that it plans to notify all people affected by this group error, so be on the lookout for any mail from Social Security. If you are one of the people affected by this mass error or one of the "routine" SSA mistakes, we at The Peninsula Center can help in your legal resurrection.

Sources: "[Dead or Alive? Social Security Misclassified Some](#)" "[Social Security Data Errors Can Turn People Into the Living Dead](#)," "[What It's Like to Be Declared Dead by the Government](#)," "[Vet. One of 4,200 Mistakenly Declared Dead by VA, Feels 'Resurrected'](#)."