

Oasis

SEPTEMBER 1994



Official White House photo

**President Clinton signs law
making SSA independent**

Oasis

Click on a Topic Below

Features

- 3** Legislation signed to make SSA an independent agency
- 5** Expert system enhances service
- 7** Contact station goes online
- 8** Video helps explain SSI work incentives

- 9** Better business suggestions
- 10** Hispanic conference in San Antonio draws many employees
- 12** SSA scholarship winners named
- 14** Office profile: Nicetown, Pa.
- 18** Daughters day revisited

Departments

- 20** Scanning Social Security
- 24** Letter to the editor
- 25** Retirees
- 27** In memoriam
- 28** Life at SSA

From the editor

Last month President Clinton signed legislation - the Social Security Independence and Program Improvements Act of 1994 - that will make SSA an independent agency on March 31 of next year. That day will mark a change in our 41-year association with the Department of Health and Human Services (including the time it was known as the Department of Health, Education and Welfare).

Our new independent agency status will bring us full circle to our roots, when we first operated as an independent agency under the Social Security Board in 1935.

What does this new status mean? Commissioner Chater has said, "As an independent agency, Social Security will be more visible and, as a result, more accountable to the American public."

Our article on the new status of the agency (beginning on page 3) presents some basic information about our future organization. Details about the transition and new status will be reported in future issues of OASIS and through other employee communications channels.

Elsewhere in this issue, we highlight a new technology that is being used to assist teleservice reps in answering inquiries. The success of the expert system pilot project has led to a plan for nationwide use. The story begins on page 5.

And, beginning on page 10, we invite you to read about the first national Hispanic conference that was held in San Antonio. Employees-on their own time and at their own expense-came from all over the country to attend.

The SSA Community Scholarship Fund winners are announced, beginning on page 12, and, beginning on page 14, we present a profile of a Philadelphia district office that has benefited from the Metropolitan Office Enhancement Program.

Because we received so many contributions, we couldn't resist printing some more details about the "Take Our Daughters to Work" campaign. The "second half" of this story (which began in the July issue) begins on page 18.

Finally, we invite employees to submit suggestions for our "Life at SSA" comic strip. We're looking for light, whimsical ideas that will make readers smile.



Shirley S. Chater
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Editor

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Independence

President Clinton signs law conferring new status

At a White House Rose Garden ceremony on August 15, President Clinton signed legislation making SSA an independent federal agency.

The President, who used the pen that Franklin D. Roosevelt used to sign the original Social Security Act on Aug. 14, 1935, stated, "For millions of Americans that signature of 59 years ago transformed old age from a time of fear and want to a period of rest and reward."

SSA will officially become an independent agency on March 34 of next year. The independent SSA will have responsibility for administering the OASDI and SSI programs and will also continue its role in helping administer the Medicare and Black Lung programs.

HHS Secretary Donna Shalala and Commissioner Shirley Chater issued a joint statement that said: "...the President and the Congress are giving a new level of recognition to SSA and to all those who receive Social Security benefits and who support this system through their payroll contributions.

"The Social Security Administration will continue the tradition of service that has been its hallmark. In addition, independence will provide a special opportunity to build America's

confidence in Social Security at a critical time in the program's history"

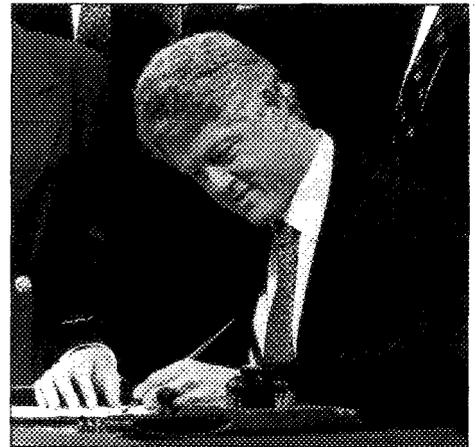
Top officials

The independent agency will be headed by a Commissioner with authority and control over all SSA personnel and activities. The Commissioner will be appointed by the President and subject to Senate confirmation. The Commissioner will serve a six-year term, with the initial term of office ending January 19, 2001.

The legislation also provides for Presidential appointment and Senate confirmation of a Deputy Commissioner and for Presidential appointment of a new position—SSA Inspector General. A Chief Financial Officer, to be appointed by the Commissioner, is also called for in the legislation.

Advisory board

The new legislation creates a seven-member Social Security Advisory Board that will meet at least four



Official White House photo

The President signs the Social Security Independence and Program Improvements Act of 1994.



Commissioner Chater (l.) and Secretary Shalala at the White House.

times a year to review "matters of policy" and make recommendations to the Commissioner. However, the board will have no role in SSA operations.

The board will consist of three members appointed by the President, two members appointed by the Speaker of the House and two members appointed by the President pro tempore of the Senate. The board members will serve staggered six-year terms.

The creation of this Advisory Board eliminates the requirement under present law for a quadrennial Advisory Council on Social Security. (The current Advisory Council will complete its work.)

SSA, HHS working together

The statement by the Secretary and Commissioner also noted that, "The close working relationship between SSA and [HHS] will be maintained. We and all the employees of HHS and SSA are committed to a smooth transition and a successful implementation of SSA as an independent agency. We are Committed to serving the American people even more effectively in the years ahead." ♦

SSA history

1935—Social Security Act passed by Congress, signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt; Social Security Board created to administer program.

1939—Social Security Board becomes a component of Federal Security Agency.

1946—Social Security Board renamed Social Security Administration.

1953—Social Security Administration becomes part of new Department of Health, Education and Welfare, which, in 1980, became Department of Health and Human Services.

Changes

Some tightening of disability payments

New Social Security legislation places tighter restrictions on the payment of Social Security and SSI benefits to people disabled by drug addiction or alcoholism.

SSA pays disability benefits to people whose mental or physical impairments render them unable to perform any substantial gainful work. Claimants for these payments must present medical evidence to support their claims.

Drug and alcohol addiction are considered medically determinable conditions which may by themselves, or in combination with other impairments, prevent a person from working.

The new legislative provisions limit payment of Social Security and SSI benefits to 36 months for individuals whose substance abuse "is material to their disability." This limit does not apply to individuals who are disabled independent of their substance abuse, i.e., a blind beneficiary who is also an alcoholic would continue to receive benefits.

The legislation provides that Social Security and SSI disability benefits can be suspended if a person does not comply with treatment provisions for drug addiction or alcoholism. Payments can be reinstated if the individual demonstrates compliance for a specified period.

Other significant changes are being made. Under law, an individual who is found to be retroactively entitled to benefit payments can receive a lump payment of past due benefits. Under the new legislation, retroactive benefits will be paid out gradually to eligible beneficiaries whose disability results from drug addiction or alcoholism. An exception is made for individuals whose housing or utility debts put them at high risk for becoming homeless.

Under current law, SSI disability recipients who are disabled because of drug addiction or alcoholism must have a representative payee who will receive and manage the use of the payments. The legislation extends this provision to Social Security disability beneficiaries whose alcoholism or drug addiction is material to a finding of disability.

Social Security must also "give preference" to the appointment of social service agencies or government agencies as representative payees for drug addicts or alcoholics, unless a family member can be shown to be a more appropriate rep payee.

Also, organizations that agree to serve as rep payees for drug addicts or alcoholics can keep 10 percent of the monthly payment or \$50, whichever is less. ♦