

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

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### Opening Statement Ranking Member Robin Kelly

#### Hearing on “Protecting Americans’ Identities: Examining Efforts to Limit the Use of Social Security Numbers.”

May 23, 2017

Thank you, Chairmen Rice and Hurd for holding this important hearing.

Originally created to track the earnings of individuals and determine eligibility for Social Security benefits, the Social Security number (SSN) has become the principal method used to verify an individual’s identity. But the proliferation of their use poses serious challenges to data security and identity theft protection.

In 2007, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) recognized that reducing the use of Social Security numbers at agencies could reduce the risks of identity theft. Ten years ago this week, OMB issued a memorandum directing agencies to reduce their use of Social Security numbers by examining where their collection was unnecessary and creating plans to end such collection within 18 months.

Now, on the ten year anniversary of the guidance, we have the opportunity to examine the challenges that have stymied agency efforts while learning from those agencies who have had success in their initiatives.

The Social Security Administration no longer prints Social Security Numbers on statements, cost of living notices, or benefit checks. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services is in the middle of efforts to remove SSNs from all Medicare cards by April 2019. Likewise, the Department of Veterans Affairs has ceased printing SSNs on prescription bottles, certain forms, and correspondence, and is working to find an alternate means of identification that will maintain patient safety while reducing the visibility of Social Security numbers on patient wristbands. These concrete steps represent real progress, and I commend the agencies on their work so far.

But barriers that still exist to full implementation of OMB’s guidance.

One of those barriers is the lack of a strong, coordinated approach from OMB itself.

GAO found that the 2007 memorandum did not define “unnecessary” use, nor did it outline requirements such as timelines or performance goals. As a result, many agencies’ plans were vague and subject to varied interpretation over the years.

Additionally, OMB did not require agencies to update their inventories of SSN collection points, making it difficult to determine whether agencies were actually reducing collection and use. OMB must provide clear direction to agencies and strengthen its monitoring of compliance.

In addition to poor coordination by OMB, federal efforts to reduce SSN use have faced other challenges. Agencies are statutorily and legally required to collect Social Security numbers for identity verification in a number of programs, and Social Security Numbers remain the standard for identity verification across government programs.

OPM briefly took steps to address this issue by working to create an alternate identifier in 2008 and again in 2015, however a lack of approved funding prevented these efforts from going forward. Until Congress refines the requirements mandating Social Security number collection and an alternate government-wide identifier is created, significant reductions in SSN use seem unlikely.

Outdated legacy IT systems also cause agencies to struggle to attain their reduction goals. Agencies do not have the funds to replace those systems and start anew. This Subcommittee has spoken at great length about the need to update the federal government’s IT infrastructure, and we must put our money where our mouth is. I am concerned that across-the-board budget and personnel cuts proposed by the Trump Administration will take us in the opposite direction and make it harder to accomplish our social security number reduction goals.

I hope my colleagues will keep this and the need to protect Americans from identity theft in mind as we discuss Fiscal Year 2018 budget proposals. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today and I yield back the balance of my time.