



Highlights of [GAO-09-966](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Finance, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The Social Security Administration (SSA) receives electronic data from other agencies to support its own programs, and provides electronic data to support more than 800 state and federal agency partners. This information aids in, among other things, the processing and distribution of beneficiary payments and the delivery of services such as driver's license issuance and voter registration. SSA relies on its information technology (IT) infrastructure—its databases, applications, networks, and IT management practices—to support its current and future needs for exchanging data with its state and federal partners. GAO was asked to (1) determine the extent to which SSA's IT infrastructure effectively and efficiently supports current data exchanges, and any system-related problems affecting its exchange partners; and (2) describe SSA's efforts to ensure that its IT infrastructure can support the agency's and its partners' future data exchange environment. To do this, GAO analyzed agency documentation and interviewed SSA officials, as well as federal and state data exchange partners.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that SSA conduct the analyses needed to define requirements for delivering data exchange services to its partners in the future and use the results of these analyses to update its target architecture. In written comments on a draft of this report, SSA agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-09-966](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Valerie C. Melvin at (202) 512-6304 or melvinv@gao.gov.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Social Security Administration's Data Exchanges Support Current Programs, but Better Planning Is Needed to Meet Future Demands

What GAO Found

Systems-related problems that affect SSA's ability to support outgoing data exchange programs have been few, and the agency has established effective procedures and mechanisms for addressing the problems that do occur. In this regard, SSA provides help-desk and on-site support to data exchange partners to help prevent or resolve problems, and uses procedures supported by a problem-identification and tracking system to facilitate problem resolution. State and federal partners with whom GAO held discussions stated that these efforts resulted in quick responses from SSA and effective resolution of problems that occurred. For example, a system that provides information for two data exchange programs that support driver's license issuance and voter registration in all 50 states was reported to have had almost 100 percent availability during the hours specified in the agreements governing these data exchanges. Further, all of the data exchange partners with whom GAO held discussions reported that the data that SSA provided were reliable. As a result, these partners stated that their ability to conduct business operations that depend on SSA data was not adversely affected by systems-related problems associated with SSA's IT infrastructure.

SSA and its partners anticipate that the number of requests for outgoing data exchanges will continue to increase and that the exchanges will become more complex as agencies request that these exchanges take place through online, real-time transactions. However, SSA officials stated that the agency's existing IT infrastructure may not be able to support the increased demand that they and their partners anticipate. To address overall agency needs for a more cost-effective and efficient computing environment, the agency is taking steps to modernize its computing capabilities and supporting infrastructure. For example, the agency is in the process of implementing an updated database environment and upgrading its software applications—steps that are intended to enable expanded and more efficient IT service delivery, including the electronic exchange of data. However, the agency has not fully implemented IT management practices specifically related to its outgoing data exchange environment, such as conducting thorough analyses to project the expected increase in requests for data and online access. Conducting these analyses and using this information as input to the agency's target architecture (i.e., a formal description of the agency's future environment) are important practices to clearly define future requirements to guide the direction of the agency's data exchange programs. Implementing these management practices is essential to ensuring that the agency is well positioned to meet the growing needs of its data exchange partners.