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May 14, 2026

Frank Bisignano, Commissioner  
Social Security Administration  
6401 Security Boulevard  
Baltimore, MD 21235

Dear Commissioner Bisignano:

On behalf of First Focus on Children and the undersigned organizations committed to advancing the well-being of children and families, we write to urge the Social Security Administration (SSA) to modernize and improve access to Social Security child survivor benefits. This request is consistent with a “digital-first” approach to service, and follows the recent recommendations issued by the Social Security Advisory Board. Our request includes: (1) making the application available online, and (2) allowing applicants to schedule appointments online.

Social Security is one of the nation’s most effective anti-poverty programs for children, providing critical income support to children and families following the death of a parent. But despite its importance, too many eligible children are not receiving the benefits for which they’re eligible. Recent analysis suggests that roughly one million children whose parents died are not connected to survivor benefits, often due to gaps in awareness and administrative barriers that make applying unnecessarily difficult. This leaves children without the support that helps mitigate the economic shock of losing a parent and their income – which can lead to negative education, health, and employment outcomes later in a child’s life.

Improving the current application process could help close this gap. Unlike some other Social Security benefits that are accessible through modern, user-friendly online systems, families seeking child survivor benefits must navigate a fragmented process that typically requires calling SSA’s national 800 number and waiting to schedule an appointment. This creates avoidable delays and places unnecessary burdens on families at a moment of acute grief and instability.

The Social Security Advisory Board (SSAB) has already identified clear, actionable solutions. In particular, the Board recommends that SSA:

- Make the survivor benefits application available online; and
- Allow applicants to self-schedule appointments online rather than requiring phone calls.

These recommendations are both practical and overdue.

First, moving the application online would reduce barriers to entry, allowing caregivers to apply on their own time, avoid long call wait times, and complete the process more efficiently. Most importantly, it would get benefits into the pockets of kids and their caregivers faster, instead of having to wait a month or longer for an appointment. SSA has already demonstrated that this approach works: its retirement and disability applications provide clear models for a secure, accessible digital application system.

Second, enabling online appointment scheduling would restore basic functionality that families expect from modern government services. Requiring families to call a centralized number creates friction that can deter or delay applications, particularly for working caregivers, grandparents, and others with limited time and resources.

Third, these changes would not only benefit families but also improve administrative efficiency. By shifting routine scheduling and application functions online, SSA can better allocate staff time toward complex cases and in-person support, reducing strain on field offices and improving overall service delivery.

The consequences of inaction are significant. When eligible children miss out on survivor benefits, families lose a stable source of income designed to replace lost parental earnings. This can increase the risk of poverty, housing instability, and hunger—outcomes that are particularly harmful during childhood that can have lasting effects.

Improving access to survivor benefits is not a matter of creating new policy. It ensures that an existing, earned benefit reaches the children it is intended to support. The steps outlined above are well within SSA's administrative authority and can be implemented even in a constrained budget environment. In fact, doing so is sound stewardship of scarce taxpayer dollars.

We urge SSA to act swiftly to:

1. Develop and launch a secure online application for child survivor benefits;
2. Implement an online appointment scheduling system for survivor benefit claims; and
3. Explore the efficacy of an outreach effort to reach eligible-but-unserved children, and evaluate the effectiveness of this outreach. This is was also recommended by the SSAB.

At a time when families are already navigating loss and uncertainty, the federal government should not add unnecessary administrative hurdles. Modernizing the survivor benefits application process is a straightforward, high-impact step that will ensure more children receive the support they need and are already eligible for under current law.

We stand ready to work with SSA to support implementation of these improvements and to ensure that all eligible children can access the benefits they deserve.

Sincerely,

First Focus on Children  
Child Welfare League of America  
Easterseals  
Save the Children