

Solutions, Strategies, Answers

Newsletter of the 18 Social Security Administration offices in Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Lehigh, Monroe, Montgomery, Northampton, and Philadelphia counties



April 2026

Issue 163

Surviving Spouse Benefits: How the Rules Differ from Retirement

You sometimes hear people say that Social Security rules are so complex that they can't be understood. Not! It's just that you need to be aware of the type of benefit being discussed and zero in on the applicable rules. So, let's examine the benefit properties for surviving spouses (*widows and widowers*) vis-à-vis retirement benefits.

Minimum Age

The earliest you can take your own retirement benefit is age 62. For a surviving spouse, benefits can start at age 60. If the survivor is caring for a child of the deceased who is under age 16, the survivor can file at any age. If the survivor became disabled between the ages of 50 to 60, the survivor can file prior to the normal age of 60.

Full Age

Most people are not aware that there is one full age chart for retirement and another for a surviving spouse. These show the benefit percentage when a person files for either benefit. Find the retirement chart at [Benefits Planner: Retirement | Retirement Age Calculator | SSA](#). Find the survivor chart at [See your Full Retirement Age \(FRA\) for Survivor benefits | SSA](#)

Earnings Limits

Both retirement beneficiaries and survivors have the same limit on earnings if they are collecting before reaching full retirement age. Note: in this situation, the **full retirement age schedule** is used for both types of benefits; the surviving spouse full age schedule is not involved here. [Exempt Amounts Under the Earnings Test](#)

Benefit Strategy for Survivors

If a survivor is age 62 or older and eligible for their own retirement, they can nonetheless take the survivor benefit only. In doing so, they will have an income while their retirement benefit continues to grow on a percentage basis. Later, when the survivor switches to their retirement, that benefit will have grown accordingly.

No Foolin'... These Answers are Legit!



Historians aren't certain, but some trace all the April pranking back to the 16th century when the Gregorian calendar changed the start of the new year from April 1 to January 1. People who were slow to get on board were subjected to hoaxes and jokes, and so it continues today. But here at SSA we would never try to fool you, so rest assured all the answers below are indeed true!

What happens when a Social Security disability beneficiary reaches full retirement age?

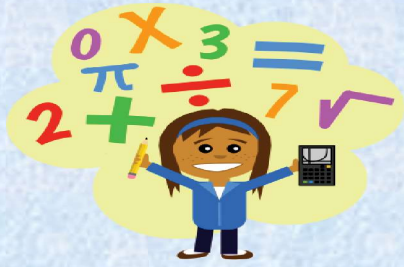
The benefit is changed to a "retirement" benefit, with the benefit then paid from the retirement trust fund. The benefit is not increased because the disability amount is already the highest amount payable on a person's record.

Can I change the day my Social Security benefit is paid?

Your date of birth determines when you are paid – either the second, third or fourth Wednesday of the month. You cannot appeal your assigned day.

Would someone who has power of attorney automatically be selected as representative payee? No. The Treasury Department does not recognize POA for negotiating federal benefits. Also, POA typically makes no finding as to an individual's competency or capability, which must be determined in representative payee cases.

Is it legal for an employer to withhold Social Security taxes from my earnings? In 1982 the Supreme Court upheld earlier Social Security rulings regarding the constitutionality of the law requiring employers to withhold taxes and pay them to the IRS. This provision is constitutional even when such withholding or payment conflicts with either the employer's or the employee's religious or other beliefs.



Crunching the Numbers

Whenever people talk about Social Security, so often they are talking about, well, what else but numbers! So, let's look at what those numbers say.

U.S. population: 342.3 million
Number of Social Security beneficiaries: 70.7 million
 This means over 1 out of every 5 people receive benefits!

Retirement beneficiaries:	53.9M	76% of total
Disability beneficiaries	7.0M	10% of total
Survivor beneficiaries	5.8M	8% of total

The remaining six percent of beneficiaries are family members of retired or disabled workers.

Average retirement amount	\$2,076
Average disability amount	\$1,633
Average surviving spouse amount	\$1,925

Trust funds – At the end of January 2026, the Old-Age and Survivors Insurance Trust Fund, along with the Disability Insurance Trust Fund, held special-issue government securities totaling **\$2.5 trillion**.

These securities are made up of short-term certificates of indebtedness and long-term bonds, and are only made available to the trust funds. In January, the combined interest rate of the trust funds was **2.56 percent**.

SSI Recipients & An Internet Discount

Lifeline is a federal initiative designed to make phone and internet services more affordable for recipients of SSI, Medicaid, SNAP, or other federal assistance programs. Eligible consumers can receive a discount of up to \$9.25 monthly. For more information and to apply, go to:

[Home - Universal Service Administrative Company](#)

To subscribe to Solutions, Strategies, Answers, contact richard.gaudiosi@ssa.gov or jessica.m.silvent@ssa.gov

“ABLE” is an Enabler (in a Good Way)



An **Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) account** is a tax-advantaged savings account to which contributions can be made to meet qualified disability expenses of the owner or designated beneficiary. ABLE accounts receive favorable treatment and are excluded from resources wholly or partly for purposes of certain means-tested federal programs.

A person can have an ABLE account if the individual is receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits, Social Security Disability benefits, or Childhood Disability benefits based on a disability that began before age 26.

Advantages of an ABLE Account

SSI recipients normally have a resource (asset) limit of \$2,000. However, with an ABLE account, only assets over \$100,000 count as a resource. If the ABLE balance exceeds \$100,000 by an amount that causes the individual to exceed the limit – whether alone or combined with other resources - SSI payments are suspended until the countable resources fall below the limit.

Any person can contribute to an ABLE account.

Total contributions from all sources are limited to the annual gift tax exclusion, unless the account owner is employed. The 2026 excludable amount is \$19,000. Account owners who work can contribute higher amounts.

Payments from an ABLE account

A “distribution” may be made only to or for the benefit of the beneficiary. Distributions for “Qualified Disability Expenses” (QDE) are not counted as taxable income. Their purpose is to improve the individual’s health, independence or quality of life. Examples include payments for transportation, assistive technology, healthcare, and employment support.

If a SSI recipient receives a distribution that is not a QDE and spends it within the same month, it has no effect on SSI. If it is retained into the next month, it then counts as a resource.

[Spotlight On Achieving A Better Life Experience \(ABLE\) Accounts | Supplemental Security Income \(SSI\) | SSA](#)