



Social Security Delays Impede Unaccompanied Children's Integration, Safety, and Stability

Unaccompanied children overcome numerous barriers as they integrate into their communities and reach young adulthood. Obtaining a Social Security number is an important step in that process. Immigrants, including youth, may request a Social Security card be issued automatically when they receive their work authorization by requesting a card's issuance on certain U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) immigration forms. Administered correctly, this interagency coordination saves time for applicants and the Social Security Administration (SSA) and facilitates the efficient issuance of new Social Security numbers (SSN). In recent months, youth using this process have faced widespread delays and failures in the delivery of requested Social Security cards. Such delays impede unaccompanied children's ability to integrate into their communities and achieve stability.

Unaccompanied children often have few or no forms of official identification. Each additional form of identification is an important proof of identity document. The Social Security card allows youth to open a bank account, obtain a driver's license, and more easily find employment, enabling them to support themselves and become independent. When needed, Social Security numbers also allow youth to access public benefits including housing support, food assistance, and disability insurance. For immigrant youth in particular, these programs can be critical first steps towards stability.

Critically, Social Security cards enable youth to find safe work opportunities with protections from exploitation and abuse such as was reported in recent New York Times investigations.¹ They can file taxes and verify their identity with other government agencies. A Social Security number also opens doors to higher education by allowing them to access federal financial aid opportunities. Without a Social Security card, children remain unable to fully contribute to their communities and, more importantly, unable to achieve the safety and stability they so desperately need.

In recognition of the importance of a Social Security card, USCIS works with the Social Security Administration to facilitate the issuance of Social Security cards to newly eligible immigrants. Individuals can apply for a SSN while submitting Form I-485, Application to Register Permanent Residence or Adjust Status, or the I-765, Application for Employment Authorization, by checking a box on either form requesting a Social Security card. SSA instructions indicate that applicants completing the Social Security number section on either form should receive their Social Security card no later than seven business days after receiving their Employment Authorization Document (EAD) or Permanent Resident cards.²

Requesting issuance of a SSN through immigration forms creates efficiencies and time savings for children and their attorneys or advocates. It allows the creation of the SSN to begin immediately upon the generation of a work authorization or permanent resident card, meaning the individual receives their SSN more quickly. Otherwise, the issuance of a new SSN requires an appointment at a local SSA field office. For youth, attending such appointments often requires missing school, lengthy travel times, and scheduling and language access challenges.

Despite efforts by the agencies to facilitate the automatic issuance of Social Security cards, in recent months unaccompanied children who have requested Social Security cards through this process, and urgently need them, have not received the cards in a timely fashion or at all. KIND has observed that the majority of clients do not receive Social Security cards after requesting them through a USCIS form. The failure to deliver the Social Security card results in unaccompanied children, their caretakers, and their attorneys spending significant and unnecessary time ensuring children receive their SSNs and cards.

¹ The New York Times, "Alone and Exploited: An investigation into America's hidden migrant child workforce;" <https://www.nytimes.com/series/alone-and-exploited>.

² Social Security Administration, "Apply For Your Social Security Number While Applying For Your Work Permit and/or Lawful Permanent Residency;" <https://www.ssa.gov/ssnvisa/ebe.html>.

In some instances, a Social Security card was generated after the request through the USCIS form, but the client or attorney never received it. Attorneys working with a client in Seattle checked the box on Form I-765 requesting to apply for a Social Security card. After the EAD arrived, the Social Security card did not arrive. The client and his attorney called the SSA to inquire about his card and were told it had been issued, and the SSA provided the client a letter stating his SSN, but had not issued a replacement card. In order to secure the Social Security card, the client then travelled to attend an appointment at the local Social Security field office where he applied for a replacement card, which was then delivered by mail to his attorney. This young man was struggling with housing insecurity and his inability to provide a Social Security card caused significant barriers in his ability to access supportive housing services.

In other cases, after the arrival of an EAD and no Social Security card, it appears that no Social Security card has ever been generated, meaning a client must proceed with the application for a new SSN. Attorneys working with a young person in foster care with severe medical conditions were told that there was no record of a request for a SSN and that the client would need to apply for one at the local field office. Their attorney coordinated with their case worker to ensure a lengthy trip to the Social Security office did not interfere with frequent medical appointments or cause them to miss school. During a school vacation week, the client and case manager traveled to the Social Security office to apply for a new SSN, which was ultimately received nearly seven months after the issuance of the initial work authorization.

The partnership between SSA and USCIS to enable unaccompanied children to apply for a Social Security card through their USCIS forms is meant to ensure Social Security cards are delivered in a timely manner. Uniformly and optimally administered, this process would save time for the SSA and for unaccompanied children. **The SSA and USCIS must work together to identify and resolve any problems in the interagency process to ensure the timely delivery of Social Security cards.**