



# BRIEF

ISSUE BRIEF

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## Lessons from Pilot Tests of Recruitment for the Promoting Opportunity Demonstration

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Lessons from POD Pilot Recruitment Tests

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- Background**
- The Social Security Administration (SSA) is carrying out the Promoting Opportunity Demonstration (POD) to evaluate a benefit offset rule for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) beneficiaries. This offset rule reduces benefits by \$1 for every \$2 earned above the Trial Work Period (TWP) level, defined as \$850 in 2018. It replaces current rules, which are more complex and may result in a sharper loss of all benefits (a “cash cliff”) for beneficiaries who engage in substantial work activity for a sustained amount of time.
  - SSDI beneficiaries in eight states who met certain eligibility requirements could volunteer for POD by responding to a mailing and giving their informed consent to enroll in the demonstration. SSA and the evaluation team needed to develop POD recruitment materials that conveyed the benefits and risks of the new rules while still attracting enough beneficiaries to the study.
  - With SSA’s guidance, the evaluation team used a two-month recruitment pilot to assess interest in POD and refine the outreach approach to meet recruitment targets for the demonstration.
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- Purpose**
- This brief summarizes findings from a rapid-cycle experiment conducted during the recruitment pilot, which included mailings to 31,296 beneficiaries. The experiment tested the effectiveness of follow-up postcards and telephone calls, an illustrative insert describing the implications of the new POD rules, and mail-back postcards to signal interest in the demonstration.
  - This brief also describes other ways that the evaluation team refined POD recruitment materials based on how beneficiaries responded to outreach.
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- Findings**
- The evaluation team found that follow-up postcards and phone calls led to similar increases in the share of beneficiaries in the pilot who volunteered for POD, but postcards were more cost-effective. Illustrative benefit scenarios and mail-back postcards did not lead to any consistent changes in the volunteer rate.
  - SSA and the evaluation team adjusted the recruitment materials to clarify the nature of POD. The adjustment emphasized that beneficiaries only needed to respond if they wanted to enroll.
  - These findings underscore the importance of continued testing and monitoring of outreach strategies over the remainder of the POD recruitment effort.
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## A. Overview

As part of the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2015 (Public Law 114-74, Section 823), Congress directed the Social Security Administration (SSA) to carry out the Promoting Opportunity Demonstration (POD). This demonstration tests a new benefit offset formula for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) beneficiaries. Existing rules for SSDI are complex, and change depending on a beneficiary's work history. For example, beneficiaries continue to receive all SSDI benefits after initially returning to work, but may eventually lose their cash benefits completely after engaging in substantial work activity for a sustained amount of time (a phenomenon commonly called the "cash cliff"). As Box 1 shows, POD attempts to simplify work history rules and eliminates the cash cliff by reducing benefits gradually as earnings increase.

### **Box 1. Overview of Current Rules and New POD Rules**

- **Current rules:** Current rules for working SSDI beneficiaries are complex and have provisions that result in a complete loss of SSDI benefits. One complexity is that current rules change over time, depending on how the beneficiary's earnings change. Specifically, the current rules do not result in any reductions in benefits during a nine-month Trial Work Period (TWP) when beneficiaries initially return to work and earn above a certain threshold (\$850 in 2018). However, the rules change after the TWP ends. SSDI beneficiaries who continue work at the Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA) level over longer periods have their cash benefits suspended and eventually terminated. In 2018, the SGA threshold for earnings was defined as \$1,180 for non-blind beneficiaries and \$1,970 for blind beneficiaries. The sharp reduction in benefits for excess earnings after the TWP ends is commonly called the "cash cliff." This may provide a strong incentive to keep earnings below the SGA threshold—especially for beneficiaries unable to earn well above that threshold.
- **New POD Rules:** POD simplifies SSDI work rules and replaces the cash cliff with a benefit offset "ramp." Under POD, the TWP is eliminated, and rules relating earnings to benefits remain constant. The new benefit offset always reduces benefits by \$1 for each \$2 earned above the greater of the TWP earnings threshold and the beneficiary's Impairment-Related Work Expenses.

The POD evaluation is a randomized controlled trial that will measure the effects of the new rules and associated POD services on key outcomes such as employment, earnings, benefits, and income. SSA contracted with Mathematica Policy Research to lead recruitment and evaluation activities and with Abt Associates to lead the implementation of POD. Abt is implementing POD in eight states over a five-year period (January 2017–December 2021).

Outreach to beneficiaries who might be interested in participating in POD had to conform to all of the requirements of Section 234 of the Social Security Act (42 United States Code 434(d)(2)), as revised by the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2015. The law stipulates that new SSDI demonstration projects must only include volunteers who provide informed written consent. To fully inform potential volunteers about how POD might affect them, recruitment materials needed to make clear that the new rules being tested in the demonstration would leave some beneficiaries worse off than under current law (for example, by eliminating the TWP).

SSA and the evaluation team conducted a pilot test to assess beneficiary interest in POD, as well as to help refine recruitment materials and other aspects of the outreach and intake process. The pilot was especially important for assessing the yield on efforts to recruit beneficiaries from a solicitation pool, and it included a recruitment experiment to test supplemental outreach approaches that might increase beneficiaries' awareness of or interest in POD. The supplemental outreach included follow-up postcards and telephone calls, an illustrative insert describing the

implications of the new POD rules, and mail-back postcards to signal interest in the demonstration.

This brief summarizes findings from the pilot test, which SSA and the evaluation team used to inform outreach to beneficiaries in the post-pilot period. The findings indicate that follow-up postcards and phone calls increased the volunteer rate by similar amounts, but postcards were more cost-effective. Additionally, SSA and the evaluation team identified other important revisions to the recruitment materials to promote a better understanding of POD among beneficiaries solicited for the demonstration. In the remainder of the brief, we summarize the approach to recruitment, the methodology for the pilot test, and findings and lessons learned from the pilot.

## B. Approach to recruitment

The evaluation team initiated contact with potential participants through mailings to eligible beneficiaries in the POD solicitation pool. SSA identified this pool of beneficiaries as those who, at the time of recruitment, were living in a site where POD was being tested, were at least age 20 and under age 62 for the duration of the project, were entitled to SSDI based on their own past earnings only (and not entitled as a dependent), were either receiving SSDI benefits or had their benefits suspended due to work, and were not participating in any other SSA demonstration project, among other criteria. The core materials in the initial mailing included a letter, supplemental information describing the current and POD work rules, and enrollment materials consisting of a consent form and a short survey.

Beneficiaries could volunteer for POD by returning a signed consent form and completed survey. Three additional features were integral to the direct outreach:

1. Beneficiaries received a \$25 payment for returning enrollment materials regardless of whether or not they consented to participate in the demonstration. All beneficiaries who completed and returned the materials received this payment.
2. To enroll in POD, recruited beneficiaries had to correctly answer two survey questions to establish that they understood POD to be a voluntary demonstration intended to improve employment outcomes. Following a similar protocol as used for past studies, these screener questions sought to verify POD's informed consent requirement.
3. SSA sent the evaluation team updated program records about beneficiaries (for example, their benefit termination status), which the evaluation team used to verify that the volunteer was still eligible for POD.

The evaluation team randomly assigned the volunteers who met these criteria to one of three study groups, which included two treatment arms and a control group (Box 2).

### ***Box 2. POD random assignment groups***

- ***Two treatment groups:*** Subjects in both treatment groups will have their monthly benefits offset using the rule described in Box 1. One treatment group's SSDI eligibility will continue if their earnings are so high that they receive no benefit check, whereas the eligibility of the other group will terminate after 12 consecutive months of earnings at that level.
- ***Control group:*** Control subjects will operate under current rules, which include a nine-month TWP, a three-month grace period during which they remain eligible for full benefits, and thereafter suspension and eventual termination of benefits for earnings above the SGA level.

The evaluation team also conducted an indirect outreach campaign to provide information about POD to the SSDI community. This campaign included distributing printed materials to stakeholders in each site, such as SSA field offices and the Vocational Rehabilitation or Work Incentives Planning and Assistance organizations that will coordinate delivery of POD and support the evaluation. In addition, the evaluation team established a call-in center to answer questions about POD and created a website for the demonstration ([www.podssa.org](http://www.podssa.org)). The main goal of these indirect efforts was to facilitate a better understanding of POD and further establish the legitimacy of the demonstration among beneficiaries and other stakeholders.

During the design phase of the project, multiple reviews of the direct and indirect outreach materials considered whether the materials presented information to beneficiaries in a clear and straightforward manner. The evaluation team pre-tested the materials with a small group of beneficiaries to obtain their feedback on the accessibility and attractiveness of the content. SSA staff, including its legal counsel, reviewed all of the materials for accuracy, especially with respect to the descriptions of current and POD work rules. Finally, an institutional review board checked that materials conformed to ethical and research standards.

**C. Methodology for the pilot test**

SSA and the evaluation team designed a two-month pilot test, conducted in January and February 2018, to learn more about interest in POD and make adjustments to the recruitment materials. The evaluation team sent a total of 31,296 mailings to beneficiaries in the POD solicitation pool—9,797 in January to beneficiaries living in seven POD states (Alabama, California, Connecticut, Maryland, Nebraska, Texas, and Vermont); and 21,499 in February to beneficiaries in all eight POD states (the seven states included in January, plus Michigan).

The pilot included an experiment to estimate the volunteer rate for beneficiaries who were only sent the core mailing and those targeted for each of four supplemental outreach methods (Exhibit 1). The team randomly assigned beneficiaries to a combination of those four outreach methods, as discussed below. In addition, the evaluation team used preliminary findings from the January mailing to adjust the core materials for the February mailing to reduce potential confusion about the voluntary nature of the demonstration.

**Exhibit 1. POD supplemental outreach methods**

Supplemental outreach	Description
1. Follow-up postcards	Two weeks after the initial mailing, the evaluation team sent a reminder postcard asking beneficiaries to enroll in POD.
2. Follow-up telephone calls	The evaluation team called beneficiaries to inform them about POD and assist in filling out the consent forms. Staff attempted up to three calls per beneficiary, starting two weeks after the initial mailing.
3. Illustrative benefit scenario inserts	Initial mailings included flyers with hypothetical examples demonstrating how participating in POD might affect benefits, earnings, and income.
4. Mail-back postcards to signal interest	Initial mailings included mail-back cards so beneficiaries could easily demonstrate interest by returning them and requesting a follow-up call for support.

Note: Exhibit 2 shows all combinations of these supplemental outreach methods that the evaluation team tested, as well as the number of beneficiaries assigned to each combination.

The evaluation team used an overlapping random assignment approach to test each supplemental method alone or together with the other methods, resulting in a 16-arm experiment (Exhibit 2). The team implemented this approach by assigning similar numbers of beneficiaries in each pilot month and state to one of the 16 possible combinations of supplemental outreach. For example, considering reminders, they assigned around 25 percent of beneficiaries to receive both a postcard and a telephone call, 25 percent to receive a postcard only, 25 percent to receive a telephone call only, and 25 percent to receive no reminders. In addition, beneficiaries in each of these reminder groups were subdivided roughly equally between those who were initially mailed only the core study materials, those who had only an illustrative benefit scenario added to the initial mailing, those who had only a mail-back postcard added to the initial mailing, and those whose initial mailing had both additions. This design allowed the evaluation team to measure the gains from each supplemental outreach method, as well as synergies between methods. Hence the results could give SSA flexibility to choose among a variety of options for continuing (or ending) various types of supplemental outreach when the pilot ended.

**Exhibit 2. Random assignment groups for POD recruitment experiment**

Group	Supplemental outreach methods				Number of beneficiaries	
	Follow-up postcards	Follow-up telephone calls	Illustrative benefit scenario inserts	Mail-back postcards to signal interest	January mailing	February mailing
1	+	+	+	+	608	1,349
2	+	+	+		615	1,321
3	+	+		+	614	1,346
4	+	+			599	1,360
5	+		+	+	611	1,351
6	+		+		616	1,341
7	+			+	624	1,334
8	+				613	1,340
9		+	+	+	614	1,341
10		+	+		622	1,344
11		+		+	622	1,329
12		+			605	1,347
13			+	+	607	1,350
14			+		595	1,348
15				+	624	1,339
16					608	1,359

Note: A “+” symbol indicates that the given group was assigned to the supplemental outreach method listed in the corresponding column, whereas a blank cell indicates that the given group was not assigned to that method. Exhibit 1 describes each of these supplemental outreach methods.



The evaluation team’s primary outcome measure for the recruitment effort was the volunteer rate—that is, the share of mailings that converted to study enrollments. This brief focuses on rates at the end of the 14th week after each mailing, given the time frame for making adjustments to direct outreach when the pilot ended. Using this measure, the “base” volunteer yield rate among beneficiaries assigned to receive *no* supplemental outreach was approximately 1.7 percent for each month.

The evaluation team calculated impacts per beneficiary assigned to receive a particular outreach method or combination of methods using a statistical model that was grounded in the random assignment design. Based on an intent-to-treat evaluation principle, the impact estimates included information from all beneficiaries who were sent mailings during the pilot, irrespective of whether the core or supplemental outreach successfully reached them. The statistical model accounted for random assignment occurring separately by month and state (using fixed effects), potential synergies between all supplemental outreach methods other than the mail-back postcard (using interaction terms), and potential heteroscedasticity (using robust standard errors).<sup>1</sup> In addition, the model included weights to account for anticipated changes in the distribution of beneficiaries across states between the recruitment experiment mailings and later mailings. However, these weights could not address the lack of information about Michigan in the January mailing and did not account for potential changes in volunteer rates after the pilot concluded.

Given two changes during the pilot that could have affected the measured effectiveness of supplemental outreach, the evaluation team estimated impacts separately by month, and they relied mainly on February results when working with SSA to make subsequent adjustments. First, as already noted, beneficiaries in Michigan could not be included in the January mailing, but were part of the remaining POD solicitation pool. Second, for the reasons described later in this brief, initial mailings sent in February and later months included an additional insert card to further highlight the voluntary nature of POD; this insert could have affected how beneficiaries responded to other features of direct outreach. As discussed in the next section, the evaluation team assessed change in recruitment response patterns between months using a statistical model similar to that described in the previous paragraph. The main differences are that, to obtain more comparable estimates for the two months, the model used weights to equalize the distribution of beneficiaries across states and it excluded beneficiaries in Michigan.

## **D. Findings**

### **Postcard follow-ups were the most efficient way to attract volunteers**

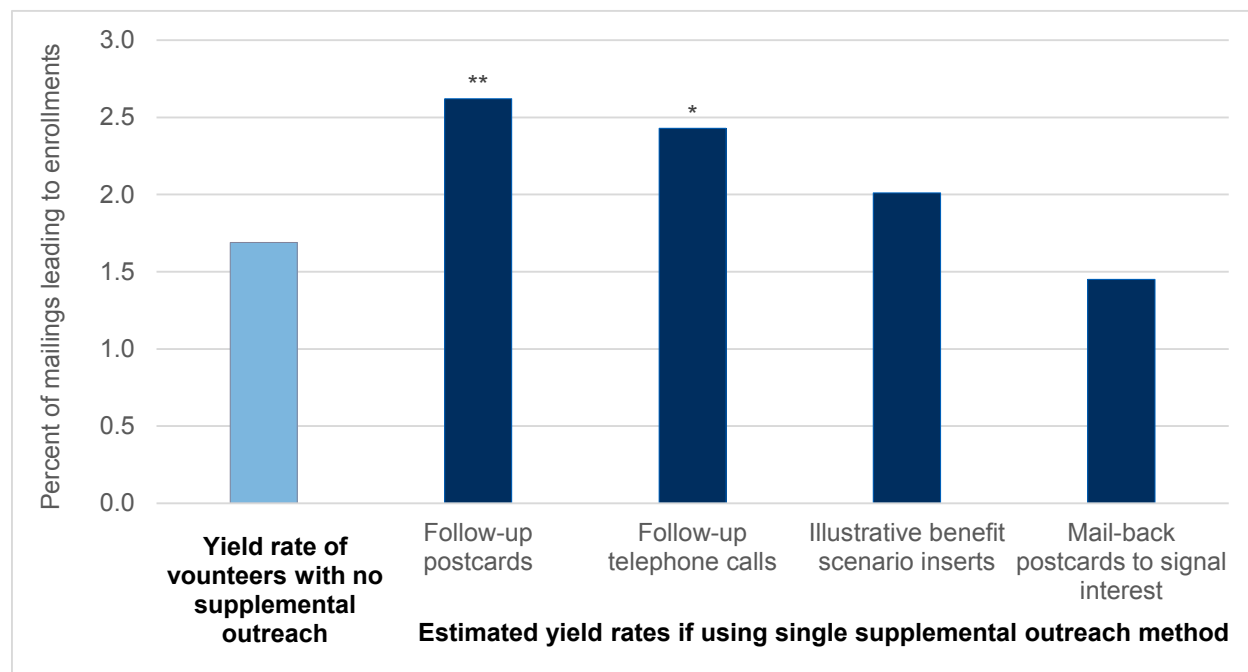
The recruitment experiment results for February indicate that 1.7 percent of beneficiaries would volunteer in response to the core mailing by the 14th week after that mailing, but that follow-ups could substantially increase volunteer rates (Exhibit 3). Postcard and telephone call follow-up reminders led to similarly large estimated increases in volunteer rates. Specifically, the evaluation team projected volunteer rates of over 2.5 percent for those sent a follow-up postcard only and for those targeted for a follow-up phone call only. That is, the estimates suggested that

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<sup>1</sup> The model did not include interactions between the mail-back postcards and other supplemental outreach methods, however, because very few beneficiaries returned these cards.

each of the two follow-up methods could produce volunteer rates roughly 1.5 times as large as the rate achieved with no supplemental outreach.

**Exhibit 3. Estimated volunteer rates by supplemental outreach method**



Note: Volunteer rates were calculated at the end of the 14th week after the initial mailing using the base rate (with no supplemental outreach) and impact estimates for February, as discussed in Section C.

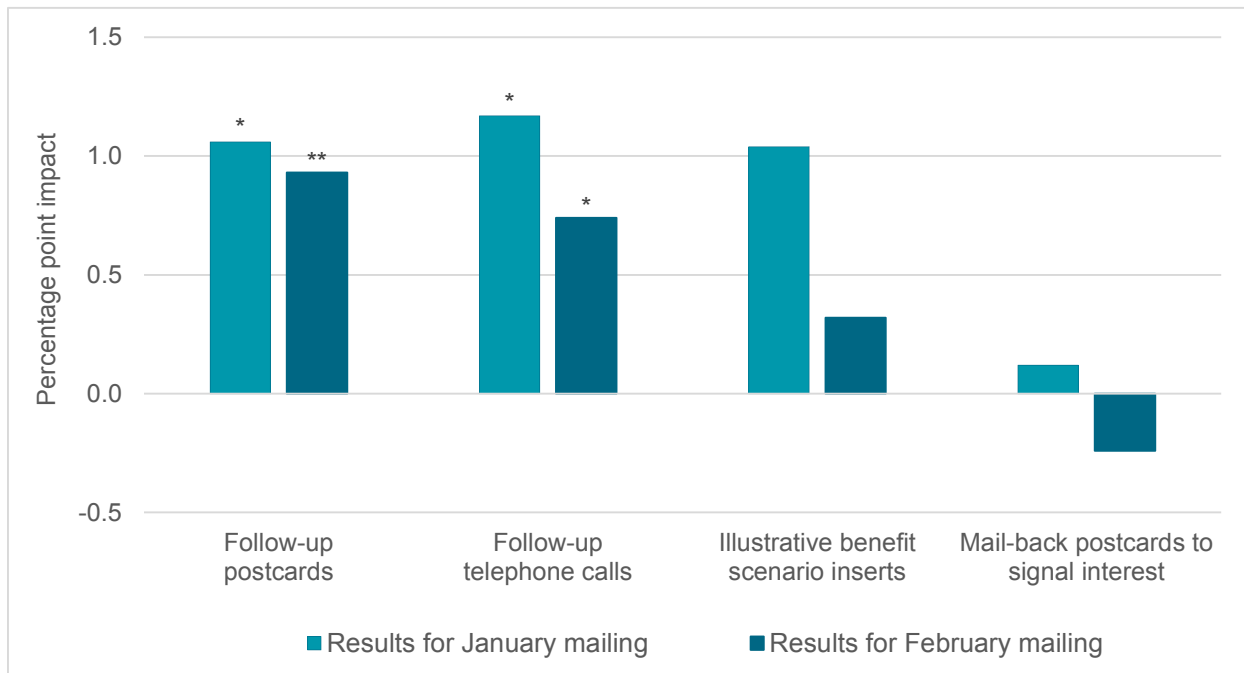
\*\*/\* indicate a statistically significant estimated increase in volunteer rate for the given supplemental outreach method, relative to the base rate, at the 5/10 percent level.

The evaluation team found no strong evidence supporting the effectiveness of the other supplemental outreach methods or combinations of the methods tested in the experiment. Benefit scenario inserts and the mail-back postcards did not produce meaningful changes in the volunteer rate: estimated volunteer rates for beneficiaries assigned to these two methods were similar to the rate among beneficiaries assigned to receive no supplemental outreach. Further, the evaluation team found no discernable synergistic effects between the supplemental outreach methods. For example, combining follow-up postcards and telephone calls did not measurably increase the volunteer rates beyond what was obtained using each follow-up method individually (results not shown).

The substantive conclusions are similar when comparing the findings from January and February, despite the differences in the outreach process noted above (Exhibit 4). Both follow-up postcards and telephone calls had substantive and positive impacts on the volunteer rate among beneficiaries included in each month’s mailing. Further, estimated impacts of the mail-back postcards were negligible in both months. In investigating this finding, the evaluation team found that less than 0.2 percent of beneficiaries assigned to receive these cards in each month returned them within the 14-week tracking period to request support with study enrollment materials. The monthly results also suggest that the illustrative benefit scenario inserts might have led to an increase in volunteer rates for the January mailing—the impact estimate for that month was only slightly smaller than the threshold for statistical significance ( $p$ -value = 0.101). However, there

was no measurable effect of these benefit scenario inserts for the February mailing, which could be partly attributable to the expansion of the solicitation pool between months or the new insert that was added to clarify the voluntary nature of POD. The next subsection provides additional discussion about the new insert card for the February mailing.

**Exhibit 4. Impact estimates of supplemental outreach methods based on POD recruitment experiment, by mailing month**



Note: Each bar in this graph represents the estimated impact of using only the given supplemental outreach method on volunteer rates measured at the end of the 14th week after the initial mailing using the methods described in Section C. The estimated volunteer rate among beneficiaries assigned to receive no supplemental outreach was approximately 1.7 percent for each month’s mailing.

\*\*/\* indicate statistical significance of the given impact estimate at the 5/10 percent level. Impact estimates for the February mailing were generally more precise than impact estimates for the January mailing due to the larger sample size in February. Thus, although the estimated impact of illustrative benefit scenarios for the January mailings is similar in size to the estimated impact of follow-up postcards in February, the former had a *p*-value of 0.101 (just above the threshold for statistical significance at the 10 percent level) whereas the latter had a *p*-value of 0.018 (indicating statistical significance at the 5 percent level).

SSA reviewed this evidence, chose to focus on a postcard follow-up strategy when the pilot ended, and asked the evaluation team to consider how to build on this evidence when developing later enhancements to direct outreach in the post-pilot period. Although both follow-up postcards and telephone calls would be effective at increasing volunteer rates, postcards were less expensive than telephone calls. One factor that limited the effectiveness of follow-up phone calls is that only 21 percent of those called were successfully contacted. Call screening and cell phone use might explain the low rate of contact, at least in part, which suggests another limitation of follow-up calls: they may only reach a subset of beneficiaries that is not representative of the full solicitation pool. It seems likely that follow-up postcards reach a broader base of beneficiaries, in addition to being more cost-effective. For these reasons, the evaluation team also later identified options for adding more mail-based outreach attempts to boost volunteer rates (see Section E).

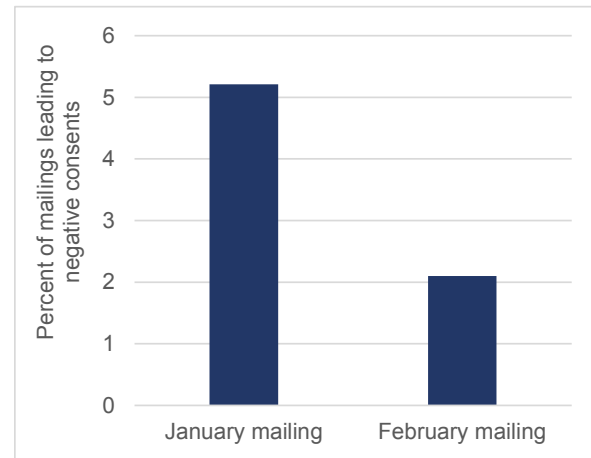
**Adjustments during the pilot clarified the voluntary nature of POD and decreased costs**

Early results for the January mailing showed that the number of beneficiaries who returned POD enrollment materials and did not consent to be part of the demonstration (“negative consents”) was larger than the number who volunteered. In response, the evaluation team debriefed staff who worked at the POD call-in center to assess potential themes from their conversations with beneficiaries that might explain these negative consent responses. Call-center staff noted receiving calls from beneficiaries who were confused about whether they needed to respond to the mailing, even though outreach materials indicated the voluntary nature of POD.

To address this potential confusion about POD, the evaluation team added an insert to the initial mailing in February. This insert stated that beneficiaries only needed to respond if they wanted to participate in the demonstration. The design of the insert emphasized the voluntary nature of POD by making this message a standalone part of *every* mailing, irrespective of the supplemental outreach methods used.

The new insert likely led to a substantial reduction in negative consents between January and February (Exhibit 5). The evaluation team assessed the change across months in the share of mailings leading to negative consents among beneficiaries assigned to receive a follow-up postcard—the supplemental method to be carried forward after the end of the pilot. The estimated share of beneficiaries who replied and withheld consent fell from 5.2 percent of those sent mailings in January to 2.1 percent of those sent mailings in February. Alternatively put, negative consents were 2.5 times higher before the insert was added. This likely reflects the impact of the new insert, as opposed to other differences across months, because the evaluation team found no significant decline in the estimated volunteer rate between January and February among beneficiaries assigned to receive follow-up postcards (results not shown).

**Exhibit 5. Reduction in negative consent rate after adding mailing insert to clarify voluntary nature of POD enrollment**



Note: Negative consents are cases in which beneficiaries returned POD enrollment materials and indicated that they did not consent to be part of the demonstration. Percentages in this graph are estimates calculated using the methods described in Section C for beneficiaries who (1) were sent initial mailings and follow-up postcards and (2) lived in states that were included in both the January and February mailings. The difference between months was statistically significant at the 5 percent level.

After reviewing the evidence, SSA decided to include the new insert in all future mailings to clarify that beneficiaries had the choice to enroll. This change in procedure was intended to reduce potential beneficiary burden and confusion, while reducing the number of payments made to those who withheld consent.

## **E. Discussion**

SSA was able to improve the efficiency of study outreach efforts using the findings from the pilot. Based on the experimental testing plan for the pilot, SSA identified and continued using a supplemental outreach method (follow-up postcards) that increased the volunteer rate at a relatively low cost compared to another effective method (follow-up calls). In addition, monitoring how the response rates changed after including the new mailing inserts in February allowed SSA to identify likely savings from giving beneficiaries clearer information about the nature of POD.

SSA and the evaluation team built on this testing and learning framework to assess potentially efficient ways to improve recruitment yields after the pilot. For instance, SSA asked the evaluation team to test two additional rounds of postcards that could potentially augment the follow-up postcard SSA had already adopted in a cost-effective way. These two rounds included (1) postcards sent in advance of the main mailing with the goal of improving beneficiaries' awareness of POD and (2) "last chance" postcards sent after the existing reminder postcard. The evaluation team will document findings based on these later changes to recruitment procedures in subsequent evaluation reports and policy briefs.

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