

Social Security plays an important role in retirement for many Kansans, but it is often misunderstood. Created in 1935, Social Security was designed to provide basic income protection — not to fully replace your paycheck in retirement. Learning how it works can help people make better decisions throughout their lives.

Most people begin their connection to Social Security at birth when they receive a Social Security number. This number follows you for life. It is used when you apply for jobs, file taxes, open financial accounts, and eventually claim Social Security and Medicare benefits. Because your earnings are tracked using this number, keeping your records accurate is important — especially if your name changes due to marriage or divorce.

How Benefits Are Earned

When you work, money is deducted from your paycheck through a payroll tax called FICA. These dollars fund Social Security and Medicare. As you work and pay into the system, you earn credits, also called work quarters. Most people need 40 credits — about 10 years of work — to qualify for retirement benefits and Medicare Part A with no monthly premium.

More Than Retirement Income

While many people think of Social Security as retirement income, the program also provides other important benefits. Disability benefits may help workers who cannot work because of a serious physical or mental condition expected to last at least one year or result in death. Survivor benefits may offer financial support to spouses and children if a working family member dies. These benefits can be especially important during unexpected life events.

When to Claim Retirement Benefits

Social Security retirement benefits can start as early as age 62 or as late as age 70. Your full retirement age depends on the year you were born. Claiming benefits early results in a smaller monthly payment, while waiting longer leads to a higher monthly payment.

Your benefit is based on your highest 35 years of earnings. Working even one or two extra years can increase future benefits, which may also help provide financial security for a surviving spouse.

Social Security and Medicare

Medicare is a federal health insurance program for people age 65 and older, as well as some younger people with disabilities. Enrollment timing matters. Missing sign-up deadlines can result in higher premiums for life.

Plan Ahead

It is never too early to learn about Social Security. Creating a free account at ssa.gov/myaccount lets you review your earnings record and estimate future benefits. For Kansans, understanding

Social Security Basics Every Kansan Should Know

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Social Security can help build a more secure retirement when combined with savings and smart planning.

Today's article was adapted from the K-State Extension Understanding Social Security Fact Sheet. For more information, contact Tara Solomon-Smith, Family & Community Wellness Agent, at 620-244-3826 or tsolomon@ksu.edu.

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