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THE OPINION PAGES | EDITORIAL

G.M.'s Victims Get an Extension

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD NOV. 20, 2014

The administrator of a compensation fund General Motors set up to pay victims of an ignition switch defect that could cause cars to turn off while they were being driven made the right call when he extended the deadline by a month for people to submit claims for deaths and serious injuries.

But he may have to extend the deadline further if more evidence emerges that not all current and previous owners of the 2.6 million affected cars, which include the Chevrolet Cobalt and Saturn Ion, have been informed about the fund.

Kenneth Feinberg, who was hired by G.M. to run the fund, says his office will now accept claims until Jan. 31 to provide more time for those who may not know they are eligible to receive payments. G.M. says it has already notified more than 4.5 million people; the company is sending out an additional 850,000 letters this week to new owners of used cars and people whose addresses in G.M.'s files were not correct.

So far, Mr. Feinberg has determined that compensation is owed to the families of 33 people who died and 39 people who suffered injuries in accidents involving the defect. He knows from past experience — as special master for the Sept. 11, 2001, funds and the BP oil spill fund — that many claims do not arrive until the final weeks and that extending deadlines can invite procrastination.

He also says it is “highly unlikely” that many people are unaware of the compensation fund, the details of which were first announced in June.

Yet Mr. Feinberg has displayed flexibility in the past, and he should be

prepared to grant more time if it becomes clear early next year that outreach efforts by the company and his team have not been sufficient.

Last week, Rachel Abrams reported in *The Times* that G.M. had not yet notified the family of one of the 13 people who died in accidents that the company had initially linked to the defective ignition switch. Relatives of Jean Averill, who was killed in a 2003 crash involving an Ion, did not know they could receive compensation until they were contacted by *The Times*. A spokesman said the company had an old address for the family.

Revelations that some company officials had known for years about the switch defect, failed to recall the cars and hid details from federal regulators have severely damaged G.M.'s credibility. Under a new chief executive, Mary Barra, the company has apologized for its catastrophic safety failure.

On Wednesday, the attorney general of Arizona said he had filed suit against the company for defrauding consumers in the state of an estimated \$3 billion in connection with the defective switch.

It will take some families and individuals time to gather information like accident and hospital records needed to establish that they have a legitimate claim. Not everybody who submits a claim will accept the compensation Mr. Feinberg offers; some people might want to pursue their claims in court. In any case, anyone with a potential claim needs to have enough time to make an informed decision.

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