

## **Do Not Cut a Vital Lifeline for Refugees**

On September 30, 2011, Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits will expire for many refugees, asylees and other humanitarian immigrants. That date is the sunset date for legislation signed by President George W. Bush in 2008 which provided an additional two years of SSI eligibility for humanitarian immigrants pursuing naturalization. A bill (**HR 2763**) introduced by Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) and Rep. Jim McDermott (D-WA) will extend this provision for an additional two years. If this bill is not passed, the Social Security Administration (SSA) estimates that about 1,500-1,600 people will lose their SSI, the only financial lifeline available to most of this extremely vulnerable population. SSA estimates that an additional 500 people could lose their benefits every month thereafter.

### **SSI offers basic income to vulnerable Americans.**

SSI provides minimal income support to eight million people who have virtually no other income or resources, all of them at least 65 years old or unable to work due to disability. The SSI program has not been modernized since its adoption in 1972 and its benefits are grossly insufficient. The Federal Benefit Rate of \$674 per month falls far short of what is required to meet basic needs. On its own, this meager federal benefit provides only 40% of what the average US older renter needs for basic economic security. Modest state supplements to the federal benefit are provided in only a handful of states and are increasingly threatened by fiscal stress in state budgets. For example, California, the most generous state, reduced its SSI supplement from \$233 to \$156 per month.

### **Refugees, asylees and other humanitarian immigrants rely on SSI to make ends meet.**

Since 1998, refugees, asylees and other humanitarian immigrants have been subject to a seven year time limit on their SSI benefits. Subsequent legislation extended eligibility for up to an additional two years; however this eligibility is set to sunset at the end of September. Many have lost benefits as their extensions have expired and thousands more will lose benefits entirely if Congress does not act. Most of those who will be cut off are of advanced age, with limited or no ability to speak English and lack a support network. The majority of these beneficiaries come from Cuba (26%), the Former Soviet Republics (14%), Iran (11%), Iraq (10%), Somalia (8%) and Bhutan (5%).

### **Allowing SSI refugee benefits to expire will harm our communities.**

Having fled persecution in their countries of origin, the refugees, asylees and other humanitarian immigrants who rely on SSI benefits are among the most vulnerable in our communities. Due to advanced age or disability, these individuals are unable to work and have little or no income or assets. SSI provides the income floor that keeps these individuals from falling into even more extreme poverty or homelessness. Receipt of SSI benefits also enables them to receive health care through the Medicaid program.

Allowing SSI benefits to expire will have detrimental human costs. Where SSI is not available, it will likely result in increased reliance on homeless shelters, emergency rooms and other community supports already stressed in the economic downturn. Extending SSI benefits for this vulnerable group is of grave importance not only to beneficiaries themselves but also for the sake of our local communities and our society at large.

### **Congress must act now to extend Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits for refugees, asylees and humanitarian immigrants.**

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