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Page 1

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## House must act to restore vital SSI lifeline for refugees

By **Gerald McIntyre**

On September 30, 2011, Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits came to an end for up to 4,600 refugees, asylees and similar immigrants admitted to the United States on humanitarian grounds. Most of those affected are older than the general SSI population, and many are unable to learn English or complete the naturalization process. With each passing month, more and more of this vulnerable group, almost all of whom are unable to return home, lose the only income they have.

Returning to their country of origin is not an option for this population because most suffered persecution there. Some had their lives threatened or their family members were killed or tortured. Still others have been persecuted for their religious beliefs, for their political views or because they belong to a dis-favored ethnic group.

SSI provides minimal income support to 8 million people, all of them at least 65 years old or unable to work because of severe disability. Although in most of the country SSI only provides enough money to bring an individual's total monthly income up to a meager \$698 a month, it is the only means of survival available to most people receiving it.

### **Efforts to Extend SSI Eligibility**

The Social Security Act limits SSI eligibility for humanitarian immigrants who have not naturalized to seven years from the date they obtained their status. Legislation enacted in 2008 and signed by President George W. Bush extended the eligibility period for two more years under certain conditions, for a total of nine years, with a third year added if a naturalization petition was pending. However, the 2008 legislation was a temporary measure and came to an end on September 30, 2011.

### **Immigration Catch 22**

Originally, there was no time limit on SSI eligibility for this population. However, a seven-year time limit was established in the 1990s under the belief that this would allow sufficient time for those affected to naturalize. While large numbers were able to naturalize during this time period, there are many for whom this has proved impossible.

In particular, those who are already of advanced age when they arrive in this country are likely to have great difficulty learning English and passing the citizenship exam. Yet, although they have been here too long to continue receiving SSI, they have not been here long enough to qualify for a waiver of the English language requirement. In the case of some humanitarian immigrants, their

immigration status does not permit them to file a citizenship application soon enough to be able to naturalize within seven years.

This past October, the Senate passed S. 1721, the “SSI Extension for Elderly and Disabled Refugees Act of 2011.” If enacted, the bill, which passed by unanimous consent, would immediately restore benefits to the refugees, asylees and other humanitarian immigrants whose benefits have already been suspended. The Senate bill would also prevent a few thousand more people from losing benefits over the course of the next year and would extend for one more year the provisions of legislation signed by President Bush in 2008. That law provided a two-year extension beyond the basic seven-year SSI eligibility period for refugees.

Similarly, President Obama’s budget sets aside \$41 million for renewing a provision that extends SSI eligibility for refugees, asylees and certain other humanitarian immigrants for two years.

If legislation is enacted to implement President Obama’s budget request, refugees, asylees and other humanitarian immigrants could continue to receive SSI benefits for a total of nine years. However, the budget does not contemplate continuing benefits for those already reaching the end of their nine years.

A similar measure to that in the Senate (H.R. 3083) was introduced in the House of Representatives by Rep. Jim McDermott (D-Wash.) and Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) and referred to committee, but is stalled in the House because of lack of support from House leadership. It is likely that those who lose their SSI will increasingly rely 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. While the pending legislation does not represent a permanent solution, it is a necessary stopgap measure, which, for the time being, will prevent unconscionable suffering. ■

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