

# NEW HORIZONS UN-LIMITED INC.

## **Social Security Disability Is Not the Problem – Misinformation and Stigma Is**

*By Lori Potrykus, Program Director, New Horizons Un-Limited*

On the first day back in session in 2015, the new Congress passed a parliamentary rule that will prevent the shifting of funds from the Retirement Trust to the Disability Insurance Trust in favor of a system overhaul (details remain to be seen). This shifting of funds is nothing new. In fact, Congress has elected to shift funds 11 times since the 1950s, including in 1983, when Congress transferred funds from the Disability Insurance Program to the Retirement program. The Social Security Administration reports that both funds will remain solvent through 2033, with a shift in funds.

In case you haven't heard, the Social Security Disability Insurance program will have a shortfall of funds in 2016, leading to a 19 percent reduction in benefits for our nation's most vulnerable population. The lawmakers who are pushing forward this agenda argue that there is rampant abuse of the current system, and that judges are simply rubber stamping approvals, claiming that billions in disability payments are fraudulent. Independent, non-partisan reviews continuously dispute these claims. In fact, a recent review by the Government Accountability Office found that only 0.4% of claims had a procedural error of some kind.

At the same time, lawmakers argue that "disabled workers" should be encouraged to seek vocational counseling and training as opposed to being directed to disability benefits – as if their disability (and stigma associated with it) will magically disappear with grossly underfunded and understaffed vocational services.

This misinformation, and stigma-generating rhetoric perpetuated by our lawmakers will put the lives of tens of millions of Americans at risk! The reality of how Americans with disabilities (including many returning veterans) use and NEED their benefits stands in stark contrast to these uninformed, misguided assumptions.

We have been working alongside our community members with disabilities for 20 years. We see the reality every day. Our lawmakers do not seem to understand this issue! Social Security Disability is NOT an entitlement – it is a meager, yet NECESSARY payment (often times less than \$700 per month) that keeps people off the streets, out of hospitals, and in their own (albeit meager) apartments.

We see the woman who suffers from chronic pain who has been denied disability benefits FOUR times! She wants to work. She is qualified to work, yet she is unable to find an employer willing to accommodate her disability. Once earning a good living, she now lives in extreme poverty, hoping that her benefits will be approved. She did not choose to live this way!

We see the man who was born with Cerebral Palsy who was "eliminated" from his full-time position and went on to obtain a technical degree and superior knowledge in Information Technology, who for three years has struggled to find an employer that will look past his disability and see his intelligence. He did not choose to be passed by!

We see countless men and women who have gone through the rank and file of Vocational Rehabilitation, only to find that their case managers are too overloaded to return their calls. They do not choose to be ignored!

We see the bright and energetic young woman with Spinal Muscular Atrophy who, determined to live on her own, found a wheelchair accessible apartment only to find that her benefits wouldn't cover the care she needed to live independently. She does not choose to be dependent!

We see the men and women who live in cockroach and vermin infested slums because their meager disability payments do not even come close to covering the skyrocketing rent of a clean, well managed apartment. They do not choose to live in squalor!

We see countless men and women who try to get ahead via vocational rehabilitation and training only to find the world outside their walls is simply not equipped to "deal with them." Or, those lucky few who do find employment, come face to face with the harsh reality that they are simply not equipped to do the work expected of them, and are let go.

Yes, we also see the minute percentage of people trying to scam the system. It happens. We know it does, and it outrages us too. But, we cannot put the lives of millions at risk to go after the very few outliers.

Cutting or privatizing benefits (as will surely be suggested) will only drive our most vulnerable citizens further into poverty, making it that much less likely that they will ever be in a position to advance themselves through training and employment.

Less money equals deeper poverty, which equals fewer opportunities, less economic power, and a weaker nation for EVERYONE – especially the majority of us in the lower and middle classes.

We must address the inevitable shortage. We get that! But, we must not be fooled by the rhetoric of politicians. Reform equals privatization and cuts, which will in turn put America's future at risk! Rather than simply cutting benefits and calling it a fiscally responsible victory, we must approach "reform" in an educated and responsible way. All parties must have an equal seat at the table.

In the end, Social Security Disability is not the problem! Politicians that manufacture crises on the backs of Americans are the problem! Politicians that allow lobbyists to dictate their actions are the problem!

We cannot allow misinformation and fact spinning to threaten the wellbeing of those who simply have no other options. And, it's true; our citizens with disabilities have NO OTHER OPTIONS! Every day, we see our community members with disabilities trying desperately to scrape off a piece of the American Dream to no avail!

There is a strong faction in this country that wishes to dismantle the government programs that protect our most vulnerable citizens. As disability advocates, we must rise up as a voting force to be reckoned with! We must let our politicians know that there is an equally strong faction that will not allow this to continue! And then, we must VOTE! We must vote for the candidates that represent the people, not special interests and lobbyists! We must vote for candidates that will lead with enlightenment and remove those that lead with stigmatizing rhetoric.

Contact your representatives today! Contact the president today! Let them know, that as a nation, we cannot afford to sink our citizens with disabilities deeper into poverty with cuts to Social Security! We cannot afford to underfund essential vocational programs! We cannot afford to underfund education!

We must invest in ALL Americans, not just the rich and powerful. A strong nation is only as strong as its weakest link. We must strengthen our nation from the bottom up and middle out if we hope to enjoy long term economic prosperity.

Contact your Representatives: <http://www.house.gov/>

Contact your Senators: <http://www.senate.gov/>

Contact the President: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/contact/>

*Articles and resources of reference:*

Social Security Administration Memo (July 28, 2014) - [http://www.ssa.gov/OACT/solvency/NA\\_20140728.pdf](http://www.ssa.gov/OACT/solvency/NA_20140728.pdf)

U.S. Government Accountability Office, Work Activity Indicates Certain Social Security Disability Insurance Payments Were Potentially Improper (August 15, 2013) - <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-13-635>