



Commentary: Failing to assist

A system designed to help some of America's most vulnerable citizens is not meeting its goal

Lisa LaBrecque
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In 1971, the U.S. Congress created the Supplemental Security Income program. The noble goal of the program was to provide financial support for people who can't work because of a significant, long-term disability.

Unfortunately, our country has failed to meet that goal. According to a report recently released by the Technical Assistance Collaborative, called "Priced Out in 2006," national average rents for both one-bedroom and efficiency apartments were more than the entire monthly income of an individual relying solely on SSI. About 3.5 million people in the United States rely on SSI as their sole source of income.

Here in New Mexico, the average SSI payment is \$603 a month. That means an individual in New Mexico who relies solely on SSI has to spend 77 percent of his income on an efficiency apartment or 88 percent of his income on a one-bedroom apartment. That leaves only about \$100 a month to pay for food, medical care, clothing, transportation and utilities.

SSI is not easy to obtain. The federal government uses a rigorous application process to screen applicants, including medical verification of a disability. People who receive SSI truly are some of our most vulnerable citizens. We have a moral obligation as a society to ensure that people with disabilities can afford decent housing and other basic necessities. Yet we have made a half-hearted attempt to meet this obligation.

An individual whose sole source of income is SSI lives on \$7,584 a year - which is 25 percent below the federal poverty line. At the same time, funding for affordable housing programs has been slashed. In particular, two of the most important federal programs for people with disabilities - the Housing Choice Voucher Program and the Section 811 Supportive Housing Program for Persons with Disabilities - have received inadequate funding during the last several years. Under these conditions, we are practically forcing many people with disabilities into homelessness.

Yet we can do something about this grave problem. First, Congress can raise the SSI benefit level so that someone living solely on SSI is living above the poverty line. Second, Congress can fund an adequate supply of affordable housing for people with disabilities.

In its report, the Technical Assistance Collaborative urges the federal government to reinvest in the Housing Choice Voucher Program and the Section 811 program and create 150,000 new units over the next 10 years for people with disabilities. There is now a federal proposal that would target affordable housing dollars to households with disabilities who are living far below the poverty level.

We can also take action at the state level by providing adequate, consistent funding for the New Mexico Housing Trust Fund. Despite the governor's promise to secure \$15 million for the New Mexico Housing Trust Fund in the 2007 legislative session, the fund only received \$2 million. This falls far short of what we need to create an adequate stock of affordable housing in New Mexico.

In addition, we need to make sure funds from the trust fund are used not just to develop homes for purchase, but also to develop high-quality rental housing. A person who only receives \$603 a month will probably never be able to buy a house. But he or she still deserves a safe, accessible, affordable and decent apartment.

Congress had the right idea when it created the SSI program in 1971. Now is the time to follow up on that promise and ensure that people with disabilities have the same standard of living that everyone wants for themselves and their families.

LaBrecque is the policy and advocacy director for the New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness. She wrote this for the New Mexico Editorial Forum, based in Santa Fe.



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