

August 31, 2021

Chairman Ron Wyden
Committee on Finance
US Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
US House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Chairman Richard Neal
Committee on Ways and Means
US House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Chairman Danny Davis
Subcommittee on Worker and Family Support
US House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Wyden, Speaker Pelosi, Chairman Neal, and Chairman Davis,

Justice in Aging writes to express our strong support for including long-overdue improvements to the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program in the reconciliation package that is currently being drafted. Justice in Aging is a national organization that uses the power of law to fight senior poverty by securing access to economic security and affordable health care for older adults with limited resources.

SSI provides critical income assistance to almost 8 million older adults and people with disabilities. The maximum SSI benefit for 2021 is just \$794 per month, well below the federal poverty line, but even this extremely modest benefit helps low-income older adults and people with disabilities to maintain housing, purchase food, and meet other basic needs.

As President Biden recognized in his campaign platform, SSI has been neglected for more than 30 years, and an array of outdated program rules mean that SSI no longer provides the basic economic security that it once did. We strongly support inclusion of President Biden's campaign commitments on SSI, as well as other important updates featured in the SSI Restoration Act of 2021 (H.R. 3824/S. 2065), in the reconciliation package. Among President Biden's key commitments, which we support, are:

1. ***Increase the minimum benefit to at least the federal poverty level.*** The current maximum SSI benefit is \$794 per month, and the average benefit in March 2021 was

only \$586 per month. This is well below the federal poverty level of \$1,073 a month for an individual. Increasing the SSI benefit to the federal poverty level would dramatically reduce poverty and hardship for the almost 8 million people currently relying on SSI benefits, ensuring that people with disabilities and older adults are better able to meet their basic needs.

2. *Update and inflation-index outdated income disregards.* The income rules for SSI beneficiaries have never been updated since the SSI program was established in 1974. The disregards have been stuck at \$20 (unearned) and \$65 (earned) for nearly 50 years, meaning they have lost virtually all of their value due to inflation. This pushes the lowest income older adults and people with disabilities even deeper into poverty and means that SSA must spend time and money adjusting SSI benefits for relatively small changes in beneficiaries' income. It is long past time to update SSI's income disregards for inflation. This is especially important for the millions of very low-income Social Security beneficiaries who also receive SSI, as Social Security benefits are considered unearned income.

3. *Eliminate rules about "in-kind support" from friends and family.* SSI's "In-Kind Support and Maintenance" (ISM) rules reduce SSI benefits by up to one third if beneficiaries receive help from loved ones with food and shelter. This drives beneficiaries even deeper into poverty, interferes with families' desires to assist their loved ones, and create tremendous inefficiency when SSA attempts to administer these complicated rules. Both Democratic- and Republican-appointed SSA Commissioners have proposed elimination of ISM.

4. *Eliminate marriage penalties.* The maximum SSI benefit for a married couple is only 150% of what two single people would receive. People on SSI also risk losing their benefits if they marry someone not on SSI. These marriage penalties should be eliminated so that beneficiaries are not forced to choose between maintaining survival benefits and marrying the person they love.

5. *Increase and inflation-index resource limits.* The resource or asset limits for SSI have not changed since 1989. Currently, individuals can only have \$2,000 in assets and married couples are only allowed \$3,000. These woefully outdated levels penalize savings and keep recipients from preparing for emergencies or meeting their needs.

As President Biden recognized during his campaign, older adults and people with disabilities should not live in poverty in America. These important and long-overdue reforms are urgently needed to ensure that the almost 8 million people who currently rely on SSI benefits are able to live in dignity. These modest but needed fixes will

provide much needed relief to the people this program was designed to serve. We are eager to work with you to make these long-overdue improvements to SSI a reality through the reconciliation package.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tracey Gronniger". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Tracey Gronniger
Directing Attorney, Economic Security
Justice in Aging