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Restoring Services to DC Residents with Disabilities Should be a 2014 Budget Priority

By Kate Coventry

A key program for DC residents with disabilities has been cut 80 percent since 2008, a victim of recession-driven budget cuts. As the District's economy and finances recover, restoring the Interim Disability Assistance (IDA) program — which provides short-term assistance to residents waiting for federal disability benefits to be approved — should be a priority.

The IDA program provides \$270 a month — or about \$9 a day — to residents who have disabilities that prevent them from working. These residents are in limbo — unable to work and waiting to qualify for federally Supplemental Security Income benefits, which can take a year or two, if not longer. IDA provides critical financial assistance during this period, helping residents meet basic needs, such as rent (often shared with others), prescriptions, and necessities like toothpaste. Without IDA, many people with disabilities are forced to rely on more costly crisis services, such as emergency rooms and shelters, thus costing the District more.

Despite the benefits, local funding for IDA was slashed in recent years, from \$5.6 million in fiscal year 2008 to just \$1.5 million this year. As a result, only 550 residents are currently receiving assistance each month, compared to 2,900 in recent years.

Although \$270 is not a lot, this small monthly payment has a real impact on the residents who receive it. **One of these residents is “Ms. I,”** a native Washington who spent decades cleaning offices, hospitals, and nursing homes. She began struggling as a result of her health conditions—AIDS, hypertension, and carpal tunnel syndrome. IDA helped her avoid eviction while awaiting a determination from SSI, paying for bus fare to get to medical appointments and for a cell phone so she could communicate with her lawyer. After nearly two years, her SSI application was finally approved.

At that point, the federal government re-paid the District for all of the IDA benefits Ms. I. had received. That is how interim disability programs work in DC and the 37 states that have them. Once an SSI application is approved, the federal government reimburses DC and the states for benefits provided during the application period.

IDA is a good investment in the well-being of recipients and for the city as a whole. The District can help an additional 1,200 residents get this critical assistance by increasing local funding for IDA by \$3.9 million in the fiscal year 2014 budget.