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TESTIMONY OF KATE COVENTRY, POLICY ANALYST
At the Public Hearing on
Human Services Agency Performance: Department of Human Services
District of Columbia Committee on Human Services
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Chairman Graham and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Kate Coventry, and I am a policy analyst with the DC Fiscal Policy Institute. DCFPI engages in research and public education on the fiscal and economic health of the District of Columbia, with a particular emphasis on how policies impact low-and-moderate income families.

I am here today to testify on the need to expand efforts to help recipients of both Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Interim Disability Assistance (IDA) qualify for Supplemental Security Income (SSI). This requires expanded efforts to identify TANF parents who have undiagnosed disabilities that would qualify them for SSI. It also requires more intensive support early on in the SSI application process for both TANF and IDA recipients.

Helping more DC residents with disabilities get SSI would improve their financial stability and also provide fiscal benefits to the District, because SSI benefits are fully federally funded. There is substantial research showing that early assistance in the SSI process, which the District currently does not offer, greatly increases the success in getting approved for SSI benefits.

Helping residents with disabilities get on to the Social Security Administration's Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program is beneficial in several ways. First, SSI benefits lead to higher and stable household incomes. The monthly SSI benefit for an individual is \$710 a month in 2013, and benefits are adjusted for inflation each year. When a TANF parent receives SSI, she is dropped from the TANF grant, but can still receive TANF support for the children. The combined SSI/TANF benefit is substantially higher than DC's TANF-only benefits, which stand at \$428 for a family of three.

SSI also can play a critical support to homeless individuals with disabilities. Mathematica Policy Research, a national research organization, notes that receiving SSI is "often an important first step in improving their life circumstances"¹ because SSI provides financial resources to secure housing, as well as employment assistance designed to meet the specific needs of individuals with disabilities. Recognizing this, the US Interagency Council on Homelessness has included helping individuals assess SSI benefits as part of its strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness.²

States and localities also benefit when individuals secure SSI because SSI injects new federal dollars into the local economy. Recipients spend most, if not all, of their benefits on essential needs,

¹ Mathematica Policy Research. Findings from a Study of the SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access and Recovery Initiative. 2009.

² US Interagency Council on Homelessness. http://www.usich.gov/plan_objective/accessing_mainstream_benefits

stimulating economic activity through rent payments and food and clothing purchases. Beyond that, because the federal TANF block grant is a fixed amount from year to year, states receive the same federal TANF funding to serve fewer recipients when a TANF parent moves to SSI. Helping TANF parents with disabilities move to SSI also helps states meet their TANF work participation requirement because TANF recipients with disabilities are substantially less likely to be working and more likely to be sanctioned for not meeting work requirements.³ Once parents receive SSI benefits, they are no longer counted in the state's work participation rate.

SSI Application Support Is Needed But Lacking in DC

Application support is critical in helping residents with disabilities qualify for SSI. Applicants must complete a long written application, submit medical and vocational documentation, and often undergo special medical and psychological evaluations. Less than one-third of applicants are awarded benefits based on their initial application, and nearly two-thirds of applicants drop out before completing the appeals process.

Recognizing both the benefits to the state and to recipients, a number of states provide SSI advocacy services, including helping clients fill out the application, gathering medical documentation, and assisting with appeals. SSI advocacy is effective. While only 40 percent of adjudicated SSI applications are approved, 85 to 95 percent of applicants who receive case management and legal advocacy are approved.⁴ A study of best practices that "successful SSI advocacy programs identify and meet with potential clients as early as possible."⁵

Yet currently the District offers no initial application assistance to IDA recipients. The Department of Human Services refers IDA applicants at the reapplication and appeals stages to pro bono legal assistance.

For TANF, the FY2012 Budget included funding to hire 9 full-time employees to assist TANF recipients apply for SSI. As of January 2013, only five employees had been hired and cases had not yet been assigned. It is unclear what is causing program delays.

To create a robust application assistance program, the District could utilize existing TANF staff and provide specialized training. The study of best practices found that "almost every successful program has a formal training component...on the Social Security process, Social Security standards, and how to effectively develop an application."⁶

Alternatively, some states contract with a for-profit company or non-profit organization to provide application assistance. In the case of for-profit company, payment is contingent on an applicant successfully obtaining SSI. The state then uses some of the federal recovery funds it receives to pay the company. In contracts with non-profit organizations, some states use a similar contingent fee

³ U.S. Social Security Administration. Disability, Welfare Reform, and Supplemental Security Income <http://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/ssb/v65n3/v65n3p14.html>

⁴ City of San Francisco. Return on Investment: How SSI Advocacy Became a Standard of Practice in San Francisco. May 2008. <http://www.sfdph.org/dph/files/SSIdocs/ROI-SSIAdvocacySFrev05022008.pdf>

⁵ Health Consumer Alliance. Investing in People to Save Counties Money: Best Practices for Moving People with Disabilities from General Assistance to SSI. September 2010. <http://healthconsumer.org/SSIAdvocacyBestPracticesRpt.pdf>

⁶ Ibid.

system while others pay a certain amount per client or per hour of assistance provided. A pilot of this approach would cost little.

Either of these approaches can improve the District's SSI advocacy efforts, offering benefits to both recipients and the District's economy, at a relatively low cost.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I'm happy to answer any questions.