



July 19, 2011

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington DC 20500

Dear President Obama,

The undersigned organizations are writing to express our strong opposition to including any changes to the Social Security programs in the deal currently being negotiated to raise the debt limit. We support thoughtful efforts to strengthen the Social Security programs' long-term financing but changes to the programs should not be made in the context of the debt limit discussion or deficit reduction. The Social Security programs are a vital part of our social insurance safety net and protect some of the poorest and most vulnerable Americans. Careful consideration should be given to the potential impact on seniors and people with disabilities before making any changes to such critical programs.

Specifically, we are opposed to changing the measure on which the Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) to Social Security benefits is based, from the current CPI-W to the "chained" CPI. Changing to the "chained" CPI from the current CPI-W as the basis of the COLA in the Social Security programs would result in a significant benefit cut for both current and future Social Security beneficiaries in the disability, retirement, and survivors programs. We oppose cutting Social Security benefits to achieve long-term solvency of the Social Security programs, including using the "chained" CPI as the basis for the Social Security COLA because it would significantly cut benefits for people with disabilities.

Millions of people with disabilities and their families rely on the Social Security disability, retirement, and survivors programs to meet their basic needs. The undersigned groups strongly support taking steps sooner rather than later to achieve the long-term financial solvency of the Social Security programs. We also understand that it is vitally important to take steps to strengthen the long-term financing of the Social Security program so that it can continue to provide the critical income support on which many of the most vulnerable members of our society depend.

Social Security benefits, however, are already very modest and should not be cut. The average monthly benefit in 2010 for a Disability Insurance program beneficiary was only \$1,068, an annual income of just \$12,813. The average monthly benefit for Retirement Insurance was only slightly higher at \$1,175 (\$14,105 per year).¹

People receiving Social Security benefits also rely on them for a significant portion of their income. Poverty rates among workers with disabilities are twice as high as others who receive Social Security and would be even higher if not for Social Security Disability Insurance benefits. Social Security benefits equal half or more of the **total** family income for about half of disabled worker beneficiaries.

¹ Source: Social Security Administration, Office of the Chief Actuary (<http://www.ssa.gov/OACT/ProgData/icp.html>).

The same is true for the retirement program. The average yearly benefit for the lowest 20% of income earners receiving retirement benefits in 2008 was \$9,989, representing 95% of their family's income.² Any cut to benefits will likely mean that a basic need (like food, medicine, or shelter) will not be met for the people who depend almost entirely on Social Security benefits.

Although some might describe use of the "chained" CPI as a mere technical change, it will likely have dramatic impacts on current and future Social Security beneficiaries. For a beneficiary receiving the average Disability Insurance benefit, benefits would be cut by \$333 per year (2.6%) after 10 years, \$692 (5.4%) after 20 years, and \$1,710 per year (13.34%) after 50 years. These cuts could be devastating and force people to make terrible life and death choices between paying for a prescription or buying food.

We strongly support thoughtful efforts to strengthen the Social Security programs long-term financing. The sooner such action is taken the better as the modest changes that are required to restore long-term actuarial balance to the program can be made gradually and fairly given enough time to do so. Strengthening Social Security does **not** require cutting benefits and changing the COLA to be based on the "chained" CPI would do just that.

We urge your support in opposing the inclusion of any changes to the Social Security programs in the deal to raise the debt limit, including changing the COLA to the "chained" CPI.

Thank you for considering our comments.

Sincerely,

American Association of People with Disabilities
American Council of the Blind
Association of Assistive Technology Act Programs
Association of University Centers on Disabilities
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law
Brain Injury Association of America
Community Access National Network
Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation
Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund
Easter Seals
Epilepsy Foundation
Health & Disability Advocates
Mental Health America
National Alliance on Mental Illness
National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities
National Association of County Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability Directors
National Association of Disability Representatives
National Association of Private Special Education Centers
National Association of State Head Injury Administrators
National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare

² Source: Social Security Administration, *Income of the Population 55 or Older, 2008*, Table 3.A6

National Council on Independent Living
National Disability Rights Network
National Multiple Sclerosis Society
National Organization of Social Security Claimants' Representatives
National Rehabilitation Association
National Respite Coalition
NISH
Paralyzed Veterans of America
The Arc of the United States
United Cerebral Palsy
United Spinal Association