



Security Matters

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Housing Assistance Preferences for People with Disabilities and Supplemental Security Income Participation

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Summary

Supplemental Security Income (SSI) provides cash assistance to non-working, low-income disabled households. With current cash transfers of \$54 billion, SSI is the largest means-tested cash assistance program for non-working households in the U.S. The number of SSI recipients increased by 70 percent from 1990 to 2017, when program participation exceeded eight million people.

Another benefit available to low-income households is housing assistance, with the primary sources being public housing and housing choice vouchers. While the five million households on housing assistance benefit from large subsidies, far more households are eligible for housing assistance than receive it. Local Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) operate waitlists to manage the demand for housing assistance. While some PHAs use a lottery system, others list preferences and rank their waitlists based on a scoring system, in which many PHAs allocate additional points to working-age household heads with disabilities.

The priority access to housing assistance that some PHAs provide to households with disabilities is a substantial financial benefit, given that most households have to wait several years before receiving assistance. The decision to apply for SSI can be a difficult one, as it involves a lengthy and costly application and disability review process. Previous studies have shown that households are more likely to apply for SSI when the relative financial incentives to do so are higher. This study explores how housing assistance – worth thousands of dollars each year to recipients – may influence people’s decision to apply for and receive SSI benefits. This work also highlights how housing costs are a major burden for low-income people.

The ultimate goal of this project is to understand how housing assistance interacts with SSI applications when compared with other public benefits programs such as TANF, SNAP, and EITC.

Key Findings

- Local housing subsidy preferences for people with disabilities are associated with increased SSI participation. This study found that those communities with more housing benefits for people with disabilities significantly increases SSI participation, especially among lower-educated and single-adult households.
- People who have disabilities and live in high-cost housing/rental markets are more likely to respond to PHA preferences, and more likely to enroll in SSI benefits. This is consistent with financially vulnerable people in cities with a high cost of living relying more heavily on housing subsidies and also on income supports through SSI. Disabilities and the inability to engage in full-time work are a problem in any community, but especially in places with expensive rents.



- This analysis finds no clear evidence of caseload shifting, which occurs when people move onto SSI after changes in other safety net programs. That is, recipients are not simply being moved from one assistance program to SSI.

Practitioner Considerations

Understanding more about local PHA policies towards households with disabilities allows practitioners and policymakers to see how households participate in both housing assistance and SSI. Programs targeting people with disabilities in one area can interact with other programs. Program administrators and practitioners can help clients understand how changes to benefit levels or eligibility in one public benefits program can reverberate into seemingly unrelated programs. When assisting clients who apply for SSI and/or housing assistance, consider:

- Encourage clients to review any local housing assistance preferences in their community. Examples of housing preferences that a PHA could have include being over age 62; currently receiving Social Security benefits; being homeless; or a victim of domestic violence. These preferences only apply to the head of household, spouse, or co-head of household. Applicants with preferences have their housing assistance applications considered before those without preferences. If your client is on a waiting list for housing assistance and their application for SSI is approved, remind them to contact their local PHA with this change in status.
- Provide tools to help clients calculate their current income and monthly rental costs. Housing assistance has several formulas to determine the rental rate, minus any allowable deductions such as a family member or head of household having a disability. Formulas for rental rates include charging the higher of 30 percent of monthly adjusted income; 10 percent of monthly income; or between \$25 to \$50 as set by the PHA. Based on factors like local housing costs and other sources of income, an individual may not see any reduction in their rental expenses when participating in housing assistance.
- Review public and any local private assistance programs and eligibility with clients. People who may be eligible for SSI benefits may not know how SSI affects benefits from other programs. Because SSI is a needs-based program for people who are aged, blind, or disabled, the amount received is based on the income currently available so the more income available, the less the SSI payment will be. SSI recipients are likely also eligible for Medicaid and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), while Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and other state programs may vary.

Resources

Find Your Local Public Housing Agency (PHA):

https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/pha/contacts

HUD Public Housing Program:

https://www.hud.gov/topics/rental_assistance/phprog

Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Eligibility for Other Government and State Programs

<https://www.ssa.gov/ssi/text-other-ussi.htm>

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