



November 30, 2012

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 avoid the Budget Control Act sequester. We support thoughtful efforts to strengthen the Social Security system's long-term financing but changes to the programs should not be made in the context of deficit reduction. The Social Security system is a vital part of our social insurance safety net and protects 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 and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits are based, from the current CPI-W to the "chained" CPI. 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 2012 Disability Insurance benefit, benefits would be cut by about \$347 per year (2.6%) after 10 years, \$720 (5.4%) after 20 years, and \$1,084 per year (8.13%) after 30 years. These cuts could be devastating and force people to make terrible life and death choices between paying for a prescription or buying food.

In addition, using the "chained" CPI to calculate the Social Security COLA would:

- Result in a significant, two-part cut in SSI benefits. Unlike Social Security, where initial benefits are based on a worker's wage history, the SSI initial payment levels are based on a federal benefit rate that is adjusted using the CPI-W. Using the "chained" CPI, the SSI initial payment levels would grow at a lower rate, meaning that a person's benefits would be cut even prior to application – and then would be cut a second time through lower cost-of-living adjustments;
- Result in a lower substantial gainful activity level for Social Security and SSI disability beneficiaries in accordance with adjustments in the retirement earnings test (RET) and Average Wage Index (AWI) that are triggered by the Social Security COLA;
- Result in a significant benefit cut for the Military Retirement and Veterans' Pension Benefit Programs, which by law receive a COLA based on the Social Security

COLA, and for Veterans' Disability Compensation, which receives a COLA enacted each year by Congress that provides an adjustment equal to the Social Security COLA.

Furthermore, if applied government-wide, the "chained" CPI would affect many other programs that are vital to people with disabilities. For example, income eligibility standards under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; formerly known as the food stamp program) and the Child Nutrition Programs (including the school meal programs) are based on changes in the federal poverty income guidelines and are indexed annually based on the CPI-U. Applying the "chained" CPI to the federal poverty income guidelines would likely result in fewer adults and children with disabilities qualifying for SNAP and the Child Nutrition Programs. Eligibility would also be reduced for other critical programs that use the federal poverty guidelines, including Head Start and the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).

Millions of people with disabilities and their families rely on the Social Security disability, retirement, and survivors programs, SSI, Veterans' Disability Compensation, and other programs affected by the "chained" CPI to meet their basic needs. The undersigned groups strongly support taking steps to achieve the long-term financial solvency of Social Security. We understand that it is vitally important to take steps to strengthen the long-term financing of the Social Security system 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 amount in September 2012 for a Disability Insurance program beneficiary was only \$1,111 - an annual income of just \$13,332. The average monthly benefit for a Retirement Insurance beneficiary was only slightly higher at \$1,237 (\$14,844 per year).

Social Security beneficiaries rely on the benefits for a significant portion of their income. Social Security disability benefits comprise more than 90 percent of the total income for almost half of non-institutionalized disabled workers, and more than 75 percent of total income for the vast majority of disabled worker beneficiaries. Social Security benefits equal half or more of the **total** family income for about half of disabled worker beneficiaries. Poverty rates among disabled worker beneficiaries are twice as high as for other Social Security beneficiaries but would be even higher if not for Social Security Disability Insurance benefits.

The same is true for beneficiaries of Social Security retirement benefits. The average yearly benefit for the lowest 20% of income earners receiving retirement benefits in 2008 was \$10,206 and that represented 94% of their family income. 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.

We strongly support thoughtful efforts to strengthen the Social Security's 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 so implement the changes. Strengthening Social Security does **not** require cutting benefits. 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 negotiations to avoid the sequester, including changing the COLA to the “chained” CPI. For more information, please contact Lisa Ekman at 240-463-5612 or [lekman@hdadvocates.org](mailto:lekman@hdadvocates.org).

Thank you for considering our comments.

Sincerely,

ACCSES

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

Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

Community Access National Network

Community Legal Services of Philadelphia

Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation

Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund

Disability Rights Legal Center

Easter Seals

Epilepsy Foundation

Goodwill Industries International

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

National Council on Independent Living

National Down Syndrome Congress

National Industries for the Blind

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

Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA)