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News Release

SOCIAL SECURITY

The Clinton Administration Seeks Additional Funding For Disability Reviews

As part of the Administration's commitment to ensure the integrity of its major disability programs, Social Security Commissioner Shirley S. Chater today announced that the Administration is asking Congress for a special funding mechanism that will permit her agency to spend a total of \$720 million during 1996 and 1997 to review, as required by law, the cases of 1.4 million people currently receiving disability benefits to make sure they still meet basic medical and other eligibility criteria.

The special funding -- which would provide \$320 million of the \$720 million to pay for 600,000 of the 1.4 million case reviews -- is, according to Chater, "an innovative funding approach that will allow us to preserve the integrity of the disability program without having to cut back on services in other areas." In the past, there was no separate funding for disability reviews. Because all of SSA's administrative expenses were funded together, an increase in spending in one area could result in a cutback in spending in another. "This special authorization," said Chater, "would allow us to handle the growth in new disability claims while we continue to ensure the integrity of current disability benefits."

But Chater emphasized she is committed to protecting the rights of those whose cases are being reviewed. "We currently have safeguards built into the review process to ensure that people are treated fairly," she said. They include:

- o a process to screen out cases that have a high likelihood of continuing eligibility;
- o a statutory standard requiring SSA to show medical improvement related to the person's ability to work before benefits are ceased; and
- o access to continued benefits while a case is being appealed.

The Social Security Act requires SSA to review the continuing eligibility of non-permanently disabled individuals at least once every three years, and the eligibility of permanently disabled beneficiaries at times determined by the Commissioner, which is generally every seven years.

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Chater said the special commitment of funds and resources would allow her agency to fulfill the legal mandate to conduct eligibility reviews in a timely manner. And Chater added, "Under the proposal, additional funding would be authorized to finance more reviews between 1998 and 2002, thus ensuring that we stay current with our legally-mandated disability review workloads."

SSA administers two disability programs for the government. The Social Security disability insurance program currently pays \$36 billion annually to 4 million people who at one time worked at jobs covered by Social Security but became disabled and unable to continue working. In addition, the agency pays \$24 billion yearly out of general revenues through the Supplemental Security Income program to 5 million low income people with disabilities who are unable to work.



Agence-France Presse

ian Serb, sat outdoors. Arsonists roamed
erbs relinquish control of the area today.

Land Transfer

'They don't want to leave their houses for the Muslims to inhabit.'

parently came from ammunition and grenades arsonists planted inside the buildings they were burning. While some of the people behind the fires were vandals, others destroyed their own homes. An elderly Serbian couple who did not want to be identified were driven out of their apartment when a neighbor set his apartment alight, setting off explosions.

"What is happening now makes the thought of the Muslims coming here a relief," said the woman, fighting back tears. "We tried so hard to save our apartment. It was all we had in the world."

"People are burning their houses because they are bitter and angry," said Milorad Katic, the Mayor of Grbavica. "They don't want to leave their houses for the Muslims to inhabit."

Most of the 2,000 or so Serbs who remained locked the doors of their buildings and barricaded themselves inside their apartments.

When one elderly woman unlocked the front door of her building this afternoon to let in a man who lived there, he brushed her aside and began to dump gasoline in the hallway. She ran desperately outside to find some Italian soldiers who rushed in and prevented the man from starting a fire.

But many were unlucky. Two women tried to toss basins of water up at a fire on a floor above them, but had to flee as the fire spread.

"We struggled for so long, we endured so much over the last four years," said one woman, "and now

U.S. Seeks to Review More Disability Cases

By ROBERT PEAR

WASHINGTON, March 18 — The Clinton Administration said today that it wanted to step up a review checking whether people receiving Social Security disability benefits were still eligible.

The Commissioner of Social Security, Shirley S. Chater, said she was asking Congress for \$720 million in 1996 and 1997 to evaluate 1.4 million of the 7.5 million people receiving disability benefits under Social Security or the Supplemental Security Income program. Under the proposal, Administration officials said, everyone receiving Social Security disability benefits will be reviewed by 2002.

The Reagan Administration created a political uproar in the early 1980's when it halted benefits for more than 500,000 people who said they could not work because of mental or physical disabilities. About half of them regained benefits after appeals.

In the Reagan years, Federal judges, governors and members of Congress from both parties harshly criticized the disability reviews, asserting that thousands of people eligible for benefits were improperly removed from the rolls. The Government suspended its efforts to cut off disability benefits from 1984 until 1986. In 1986 the Supreme Court said the Social Security Administration had had a "clandestine policy" of denying disability benefits to people with mental illness.

Mrs. Chater said that the Clinton Administration would protect the rights of beneficiaries while reviewing their cases. "We currently have safeguards built into the review process to insure that people are treated fairly," she said.

Under a 1984 law, she said, people generally cannot be removed from the rolls unless the Government can show improvement in their medical condition, and they can receive cash benefits while pursuing appeals.

Social Security officials said the new reviews would save \$3 for each dollar spent in evaluating people who now receive benefits.

The Government, which performed an average of 114,800 reviews a year from 1991 to 1995, plans to do 700,000 a year in 1996 and 1997, then 1 million a year in 1998 and 1999, in an effort to clear up a backlog.

Jonathan M. Stein, general counsel of Community Legal Services of Philadelphia, who has represented tens of thousands of people seeking disability benefits in the last 20 years, expressed concern about the new initiative.

"Today's announcement takes a step in the direction of the purge of the disabled that occurred in the early 1980's," Mr. Stein said. "There is a risk that the decisions will be arbitrary if you do so many reviews in a short time. The safeguards promised by the Commissioner are not adequate to preclude great numbers of erroneous decisions, which could be life-threatening to many people."

Social Security benefits for disabled workers average \$682 a month,

and beneficiaries become eligible for Medicare after two years.

Ethel Zelenske, a lawyer at the National Senior Citizens Law Center, said she did not know whether the procedural safeguards were adequate to protect the rights of people receiving disability benefits. "The agency's actions will speak louder than the Commissioner's words," Ms. Zelenske said.

Mrs. Chater said the reviews were necessary to comply with a 1980 law and to "insure the integrity" of the disability program.

Many supporters of the program agree that the Government should periodically review the condition of people on the rolls to identify those who are ineligible.

Representative Andrew Jacobs Jr. of Indiana, the ranking Democrat on the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Social Security, introduced a bill last year to increase the money available for disability reviews.

Under current law, money for such reviews is included in a lump sum appropriated for administration of the Social Security program. As a result, Mrs. Chater said, an increase in spending for disability reviews may cause cutbacks in spending for other purposes.

The Administration is asking Congress to provide a total of \$320 million specifically for disability reviews, in addition to the \$400 million that the agency had intended to spend on such evaluations in 1996 and 1997.

Battle

By JOHN

WASHINGTON — The fight between negotiators over provisions of a threatening to which many lay the most significant accomplishment.

The first meeting committee is scheduled ready, though, and in a storm among competitors are environmental water rights and incentives for a environment.

Differing versions ready approved Senate, contained use of Federal aid to help them pre and other environmental. Far more than in force would be special farmers, especially agricultural head of money involved billions of dollars known environmental Superfund program toxic industrial.

The fight over provisions in the latest in a string battles in Congress unlike previous where environmental themselves on the case they have major gains.

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