

Heavy-handed Reagan budget cuts leave disabled Americans stranded

HUNDREDS of thousands of disabled Americans have been stripped of their government benefits and hurled into a world for which they are not prepared. Many lack the mental or physical capacity to earn a living. Bewildered, they pray for help; some hope for death.

A review of disability pensioners to weed out the fit and the fraudulent was ordered by a Democratic Congress in 1980, when Jimmy Carter was president. But the new Republican administration executed the orders with a zeal that went beyond anything Congress had intended.

The original estimate was that a modest \$10 million would be saved between 1982 and 1985 by eliminating the undeserving. And there was no great hurry; Congress gave the Social Security Administration until January 1982 to begin processing the cases.

But the incoming Reagan administration hit the ground running. The new administrators leaped ahead with the review program almost as soon as they moved into their offices. The projected savings were revised dramatically upward: \$200 million in 1982 alone, \$900 million by 1985.

"ONE OF OUR most important goals for fiscal year 1982 and following is to save disability dollars," stated an internal Social Security Administration directive dated March 6, 1981. In that same month, the agency started sending to state disability offices the first of 357,000 cases it was to review by the end of 1981. The state offices — accustomed to a normal total of only 160,000 cases for review — were swamped.

The resulting fiasco was predictable. Overloaded review officers cut through the mountain of paperwork with a heavy axe. Some recipients were lopped off the disability rolls without so much as an interview.

And under the administration's overzealous directives, payments were withheld immediately, without waiting for the appeals. Many pensioners got their benefits back after months of unnecessary deprivation and depression. But sometimes the rulings came too late. A few, unable to cope without government support, committed suicide.

The figures tell the story: Of 1.1 million cases reviewed as of last November, 470,000 resulted in benefit cutoffs. Of these, judges or-

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dered benefits restored to 160,000 pensioners; another 120,000 cases are still in appeal. Only 190,000 recipients were finally cut off.

After a barrage of bad press, congressional pressure and some internal soul-searching, Social Security last summer announced review procedures that are supposed to make the system more humane. The changes included such reasonable procedures as requiring at least a face-to-face confrontation between the affected pensioners and the bureaucrats reviewing their cases.

Currently, the disability controversy centers on proposed legislation that would formalize the use of

a "medical improvement standard" in determining who should be cut off the disability rolls. Federal procedures now require measuring a recipient's existing medical status against the new eligibility standards. The burden is on the beneficiaries to prove that they should continue to receive disability checks.

BY USING the "medical improvement standard," a beneficiary's past medical history becomes crucial. And the burden is on the government to prove that the recipient has shown medical improvement from the condition that originally earned the disability pension.

At least 12 states are under court order to use the medical improvement standard. Ten more states have defied Social Security's guidelines and imposed moratoriums on cutoffs until the improvement standard is adopted.

But the administration opposes legislation to make the improvement standard universal, claiming that it would cost \$3 billion in benefits each year. (The Congressional Budget Office estimates the cost at \$1.8 billion.) The White House has tentatively decided, however, to declare an 18-month moratorium on the review of disability cases.

One Republican who is concerned at the political fallout of the administration's position is Pennsylvania's Sen. John Heinz. He said he was "frankly shocked" when Social Security Commissioner Martha McSteen told the Senate Finance Committee of White House opposition last January.

"I don't think (the president) understands just how bad the position of his administration is on this issue, and how much it is going to hurt him if it is allowed to stand," Heinz said.

IN FEBRUARY, when Health and Human Services Secretary Margaret Heckler reiterated the opposition, Heinz said, "The failure to correct a flawed system that daily generates more disaster for genuinely disabled persons lends credibility to the president's opponents who talk about fairness."

And in a recent private letter to White House aide Richard Darman, Heinz was even blunter. The note, seen by my associate Tony Capaccio, said, "It is my specific concern that this issue, if left unresolved, is going to be politically damaging to President Reagan."

Darman hasn't responded as of this writing.



Sen. John Heinz

Outraged over callousness

Jack Anderson syndicated column
Example from:
Sunday Patriot-News
Harrisburg, PA
Sunday, April 1, 1984
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