

September 3, 2008

Senator Barack Obama
Obama for America
P.O. Box 8102
Chicago, IL 60680

Dear Senator Obama:

During the 2008 presidential campaign, we have heard discussion of the future of the major entitlement programs. Most of these discussions relate to the solvency of Social Security retirement and Medicare, and the availability of benefits to retirees long term.

While this gathering storm garners all the headlines, another key component of our societal safety net is already in crisis. The Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) system is supposed to ensure that working Americans will be able to support themselves and their families even in the face of serious illness or disabling injury. Unfortunately, this system is completely broken.

The number of Americans with disabilities is growing rapidly, in large part due to the aging baby boomer generation. At the same time, a shrinking federal government budget and a wave of retirements are thinning the ranks of Social Security field workers who review disability claims and make benefit determinations. Faced with declining resources and a disabled population that has more than doubled since 1990, the system just can't keep up.

The result is that the SSDI system is bursting at the seams, with three-quarters of a million Americans experiencing delays of months—or even years—in obtaining their rightful benefits. More than 140,000 people have waited more than 900 days just for a hearing. As of June, the average wait time for a decision on benefits at the Orland Park, Peoria and Oak Brook hearing offices was more than 23 months. Chicago was only slightly better, at just over 21 months.

The very same challenges are affecting the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program serving the needy aged, blind or disabled individuals. SSI applications are projected to reach 2.1 million by the end of 2008, which is a 37 percent increase from 10 years ago. The number of recipients is expected to reach 7.2 million, an increase of 15 percent from 10 years ago. SSA also reports that current funding and staffing shortages threaten its ability to administer this program effectively and timely.

These delays are unconscionable. They represent the breaking of a promise between citizens and their government. American workers paid for disability income protection with their personal tax dollars with the expectation that it would be there for them when

they most needed help. A top priority of the next president of the United States must be the fulfillment of that promise by repairing this shattered system.

We have been on the front lines of the disability backlog challenge for many years. We have seen lives fall to pieces and families face serious hardship while individuals with disabilities waited for the benefits they had earned to be awarded. It is in light of that experience that we can argue forcefully that the backlog is so immense it will take an all-hands-on-deck approach to resolve, with government and industry working together to meet this challenge.

The next administration can work with Congress to attack this crisis on several fronts: (1) provide adequate funding to staff and administer SSDI processes, including emergency funding to clear the backlog; (2) act more quickly to embrace modern technology to move claimants through the process faster; and, (3) combine the best parts of the private, non-profit and government sectors to find innovative solutions to reduce the administrative burden on the system and the applicants.

I am writing to urge you to raise this issue during the campaign. Tell the American people what you plan to do to address this enormous problem. Three-quarters of a million Americans need our help today. Will you be there for them?

Sincerely,



Jim Allsup
Founder, President & CEO
Allsup Inc.



Andrew J. Imparato
President & CEO
American Association of
People with Disabilities