Improve Equity in our Supplemental Security Income Program

Co-Goal Leaders: Stephanie Hall, Assistant Deputy Commissioner, Office of Operations
Stephen Evangelista, Acting Deputy Commissioner Office of Retirement and Disability Policy
Goal Overview

Goal statement

Improve equity in our Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program through increased outreach and improved benefit delivery, including to communities of color and underserved communities.

- By September 30, 2023, increase the number of all SSI applications by 15 percent, relative to the 2021 baseline, restoring rates closer to pre-pandemic levels.

- By September 30, 2023, increase the number of SSI applications from underserved communities by 25 percent, relative to the 2021 baseline.

We define “underserved communities” as ZIP codes with a 30+ percent decline in SSI applications between FY 2019 and FY 2021 and majorities of (a) people of color and/or (b) people living at or below the 150 percent Federal poverty threshold.
Goal Overview

Problem to Be Solved

- The number of SSI applications have decreased every year since 2010, including a pandemic-era decrease of 18 percent between 2019 and 2021. The SSI program rules are administratively complex and we have limited digital tools.

What Success Looks Like¹

- Increasing the overall number of SSI applications in order to ensure we are restoring service closer to pre-pandemic levels.
- Increasing the number of SSI applications from underserved communities and communities of color to restore applications closer to pre-pandemic levels.
- Identifying and mitigating barriers resulting from our policies, systems, and operations that may make it more challenging for individuals to reach us.
- Increasing the number of SSI protective filings received compared to FY 2021 levels.
- Improving the public’s understanding of the SSI program through targeted outreach.
- Increasing the number of community-based third-party partners and the referrals, protective filings, and SSI applications they secure.

¹ Demonstrates progress towards achieving our Agency Strategic Plan’s Identify and Address Barriers to Accessing Services, Build a Customer-Focused Organization, and Improving the Accuracy and Administration of Our Programs strategic objectives.
• Conducting customer experience research and gathering feedback using human-centered design testing related to simplifying the Application for Supplemental Security Income (SSA-8000 and SSA-8001) so that the application is more accessible and easier to understand, both for the claimants as well as their representatives.
## Goal target(s)

### Tracking the goal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By...</th>
<th>We will...</th>
<th>Name of indicator</th>
<th>Target value</th>
<th>Starting value*</th>
<th>Current value**</th>
<th>Update cycle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>09/30/2023</td>
<td>Increase the number of all SSI applications by 15 percent, relative to 2021 baseline, restoring rates to pre-pandemic levels.</td>
<td>Number of all SSI applications</td>
<td>1,758,656²</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1,141,677</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09/30/2023</td>
<td>Increase the number of SSI applications from underserved communities by 25 percent, relative to the 2021 baseline.</td>
<td>Number of SSI applications from underserved communities</td>
<td>127,749²</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>84,731</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SSI protective filings using electronic SSI Protective Filing</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>122,669</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Customer Experience SSI Research</td>
<td>Complete initial research by FY 2022, Q4</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>Quarterly effective FY 2022 Q4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SSI applications received from third party partners</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>3,539</td>
<td></td>
<td>Monthly</td>
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* As of 09/24/21
** Value represents fiscal year to date performance as of the end of the most recent quarter

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² Since the previous report, we identified a calculation error for the week ending January 1, 2021, which led us to overestimate the total number of SSI applications received in 2021 by about 80,000 applications. To correct the error, we adjusted the receipt count by using historical 2020 SSI Blind/Disabled data to estimate receipts for the week of January 1, 2021 and added this estimate to the other 51 weeks of actual data to create the revised 2021 count. We have corrected references to the 2021 data throughout the document. In addition, given that our target values are based on 2021 data, we have also recalculated our APG targets accordingly, resulting in changes in (a) all SSI applications from 1.9 million to 1.8 million and (b) SSI applications from underserved communities from 136,706 to 127,749. Please note that this data error did not affect benefit payments and we have implemented a fix to prevent a recurrence.
Goal Team

Leadership Team

Stephanie Hall, Assistant Deputy Commissioner
Office of Operations – Co-Goal Leader

Stephen Evangelista, Acting Deputy Commissioner
Office of Retirement and Disability Policy – Co-Goal Leader

Senior Advisor (Office of Operations)

Implementation Team

Associate Commissioner (Office of Retirement and Disability Policy)
Office of Income Security Programs

Associate Commissioner (Office of Communications)
Office of Strategic and Digital Communications

Assistant Deputy Commissioner (Office of Systems)

Regional Commissioners (Office of Operations)
Regional Offices
Goal Strategies

Implementation Strategies:

- **Improve service delivery**
  - **Improve our understanding of our customers and improve access.**
    - Document the user journey associated with applying for adult SSI disability payments and identify specific rules and requirements that are good candidates for simplification.
    - Assess specific simplification proposals to reduce administrative burden without reducing program integrity.
    - Apply this research to inform our planned application simplification and expansion of online SSI services.
  - **Simplify the application process**
    - Implement an online tool for individuals and third parties to establish a protective filing for SSI. Establishing a protective filing date is the first step in the SSI journey. An online tool will enable individuals to express intent to file for SSI benefits without waiting for agent-assisted service or sending a mailed request. We expect high usage among individuals, representatives, and others who provide services to people facing barriers to accessing our services.
    - Implement the simplified SSI application across service channels.
  - **Address barriers to filing for SSI**
    - **Technology and Access Barriers**
      - Reopen our Field Offices to unscheduled visitors and people facing barriers.
      - Modernize our National 800 Number platform and telephone capabilities to improve telephone service delivery.
      - Expand access to SSI services online, including wage reporting and the online protective filing process.

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3 Other providers include, for example, State and local service providers, medical service providers, housing and homeless shelter administrators, local disability advocates and service providers.
filing tool.

• Conduct focused outreach and marketing to reach SSI-eligible people in underserved communities based on demographic data (e.g., access to Field Offices, predominant modes of transportation, spoken language, age, and broadband access).

• Identify additional community-based partners in underserved communities and communities of color to expand our reach through third party advocates and service providers.

  o Economic, Policy, and Social Barriers
    • Assess the effects of changes to our service delivery methods on the accessibility, use, efficiency, security, and equitable delivery of our services.
    • Assess whether the Disability Insurance (DI) and SSI programs are equitably serving and meeting the needs of those intended
    • Assess the effects of simplifying administrative rules and requirements on reducing the burden on program participants while supporting program integrity.

External Considerations

• There are many reasons that might shape an individual’s decision to file for SSI benefits that are outside our control; and

• Research suggests that increasing the number of applications may not be achieved by simply expanding access to representation or third party partnerships.
**Key indicators**

**Primary Indicator:** Total SSI Applications\(^2,4\)

\(^4\) Returning to previous expectations would require an increase of about 7 percent of SSI applications per year in FY 2022 and FY 2023.
**Primary Indicator:** Total SSI Applications

**SSI Applications Received**

- **FY 2021**
- **FY 2022**
Primary Indicator: SSI Applications from underserved communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Annual Results</th>
<th>FY 2023 Target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>160,000</td>
<td>120,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>120,000</td>
<td>120,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>120,000</td>
<td>120,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>120,000</td>
<td>120,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2023</td>
<td>120,000</td>
<td>120,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Primary Indicator:** SSI Applications from underserved communities

**Graph:**

SSI Applications Received – Underserved Communities

Monthly Results

- **FY 2021**
- **FY 2022**
# Key milestones

## Milestone Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Milestone</th>
<th>Milestone Due Date</th>
<th>Milestone Status</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finalize usability testing for online SSI protective filing tool</td>
<td>Q1 FY 2022</td>
<td>Complete</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finalize framework for SSI application simplification</td>
<td>Q2 FY 2022</td>
<td>Complete</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Identify underserved communities and baseline FY 2021 data</td>
<td>Q2 FY 2022</td>
<td>Complete</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Implement online SSI protective filing tool</td>
<td>Q2 FY 2022</td>
<td>Complete</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Initiate outreach in 25 percent of underserved communities</td>
<td>Q3 FY 2022</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
<td>We expanded the targeted outreach area and are working on a new marketing plan. This has been delayed to Q4.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete SSI customer experience research</td>
<td>Q4 FY 2022</td>
<td>On-Track</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify the basic eligibility questions for a simplified SSI application</td>
<td>Q4 FY 2022</td>
<td>On-Track</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expand outreach in underserved communities by 25 percent</td>
<td>Q1 FY 2023</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Finalize prioritized list of SSI application improvements</td>
<td>Q1 FY 2023</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Expand outreach in underserved communities by 50 percent</td>
<td>Q2 FY 2023</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore strategies to improve how we define and identify underserved communities</td>
<td>Q3 FY 2023</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Increase SSI protective filings received through the online protective filing tool by 20 compared to FY 2022</td>
<td>Q4 FY 2023</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase SSI applications in underserved communities by 25 percent relative to the 2021 baseline</td>
<td>Q4 FY 2023</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase SSI applications nationwide by 15 percent relative to the 2021 baseline</td>
<td>Q4 FY 2023</td>
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</table>
Among our accomplishments in the third quarter of FY 2022, we finalized the list of SSI application questions for usability testing. On a parallel track, we began the high-level analysis needed to document the touchpoints across the SSI application customer journey and how our customers use different service channels. These efforts together will inform the future intake process and technical requirements to simplify the SSI application.

We continued to monitor incoming submissions from the protective filing tool which was implemented in March 2022. FY 2022 Q3 data trends continue to show high third-party usage, as well as usage by those experiencing homelessness and those in dire-need situations. We convened a cross-component team to analyze data across several systems used in the claims-taking journey. These analyses will help to inform improvements to the protective filing tool. We continue to explore ways to screen customers earlier for potential eligibility.

We conducted a survey of our third-party claims-taking partnerships to understand the barriers partners faced accessing their clients through the pandemic. The overwhelming majority of partners reported that staffing constraints, the complexity of the SSI application, and the need for supplemental training to assist clients with the application process are major barriers to submitting applications. We will use survey feedback to inform if, and how, we modify our claims-taking agreements with third parties and our customer experience work, more broadly.

We also continued working with our paid advertising vendor to provide demographic and other data for use in determining innovative strategies for outreach to designated underserved communities.
In addition to the APG, we are implementing data gathering tools and procedures to track our progress related to the following activities:

- Outreach in underserved communities;
- SSI applications received from dedicated third parties;
- Number of SSI protective filings received through the new online protective filing tool; and
- Number of SSI protective filings and applications received from individuals and third parties in underserved communities.

Most of this data collection will be automated, with the exception of the incoming claims from dedicated third parties, which requires manual coding and reconciliation with our existing databases.
Additional information

Stakeholder / Congressional Consultations

Internal Stakeholders
Office of Retirement and Disability Policy (ORDP): We work with ORDP to identify simplification opportunities, streamline across benefit programs, and craft implementable policy.
Office of Systems (OS): We collaborate with our OS to build automated tools for employees and the public to administer our programs.
Office of General Counsel (OGC): We rely on agency counsel to interpret relevant statutes and assist in crafting implementable regulations.
Office of Human Resources (OHR): We work with the OHR to hire new employees and develop and deliver training.
Employees: We provide continuous training to our employees on program changes and delivering accurate and timely service to the public.

External Stakeholders
The Public: The public expects us to provide an easy and understandable way to file for benefits using different service channels.
Congress: Congress maintains an interest in program simplification, automation, and service delivery improvement for our customers across all service channels.
Labor Union Organization: The American Federation of Government Employees represents our Field Office employees and provides input to leadership within the Office of Operations.
Advocacy Groups: They advocate for the rights of people with disabilities, including advocating for secure and convenient service delivery options and in-person services for vulnerable populations.