

Background on SSI and Refugees

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Current Law

Needy aged, blind, and disabled refugees and asylees are eligible for Federal Supplemental Security (SSI) benefits during their first 7 years in the United States. After this initial 7-year period, eligibility for Federal SSI benefits will continue only if the individual has become a citizen. However, several States, including CA and IL, make State benefits available to individuals no longer eligible for Federal SSI benefits.

The maximum monthly SSI benefit in 2007 is \$623 per individual and \$934 per couple.

Various proposals have suggested extending eligibility for benefits to the first 8 years after entry (President Bush's FY08 Budget, which costs \$83 million over 5 years), the first 9 years after entry (H.R. 899 in the 109th Congress, introduced by Rep. Cardin and cosponsored by Reps. English, Levin, McDermott, Becerra et al.). Others propose permanent eligibility for refugees, or limiting any extension of eligibility beyond 7 years only if the refugee has applied for citizenship and is waiting for his or her application to finish being processed.

History

The 1996 welfare reform law (P.L. 104-193) generally restricted eligibility for means-tested benefits for noncitizens. However, the welfare reform law provided specific exceptions from these restrictions for refugees, allowing them full continued eligibility for benefits during their first 5 years in the U.S.

The Balanced Budget Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-33) lengthened the period of initial eligibility for SSI benefits for refugees to the first 7 years in the U.S.