



## Commemorating 40 Years Of Disability Advocacy 1973-2013

Sent via email to [60m@cbsnews.com](mailto:60m@cbsnews.com)

Bill Owens  
Executive Editor, CBS's 60 Minutes  
524 W. 57<sup>th</sup> St.  
New York, NY 10019

Dear Mr. Owens:

We are aware that a CBS *60 Minutes* broadcast on the Social Security disability programs is scheduled to air this coming Sunday, October 6<sup>th</sup>, which has been promoted with the following preview posted to CBS's website:

*"Sunday, October 6 2013, CBS's 60 Minutes: Disability, USA – Steve Kroft reports on the alarming state of the federal disability program, which has exploded in size in the last four years and could become the first federal benefits program to run out of money."*

An array of recent media coverage of the Social Security disability programs, including a series broadcast on Public Radio International's *Planet Money* and *This American Life*, as well as National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, has painted a misleading and sharply inaccurate picture of these important programs, which serve as a vital lifeline for millions of Americans with significant disabilities and illnesses. In so doing, it has done a tremendous disservice to readers, listeners and viewers, as well as to people with disabilities.

CBS's *60 Minutes* prides itself on high journalistic standards and sharp investigative reporting, and for decades has played a valuable role by exposing serious flaws in otherwise well-regarded institutions and programs. However, with this role comes responsibility. On behalf of the undersigned members of the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities (CCD), we write to express our strong concern and interest that any reporting by *60 Minutes* on the Social Security disability programs strive not only for accuracy but also for completeness, by providing needed context and balance, as well as essential facts about the disability programs, such as those laid out in the enclosed document.

The Social Security disability standard is incredibly strict, and just four in ten applicants are awarded benefits. Award rates have further declined during the recent economic downturn. Demonstrating eligibility requires extensive medical evidence, and even people with life-threatening illnesses can wait months if not years to receive benefits. Many individuals are denied despite significant disabilities and chronic illnesses. Benefits are modest but vital – averaging just over \$500 per month for Supplemental Security Income beneficiaries and a little more than \$1,100 per month for Social Security Disability Insurance beneficiaries – and for many, disability benefits make it possible to secure stable housing and purchase food, life-sustaining medications, and other basic necessities.

Moreover, as far back as the mid-1990s, actuarial projections foretold the growth that has occurred in the number of people receiving Social Security Disability Insurance benefits, and the Social Security Administration's Office of the Actuary (among other experts) notes that demographic factors – including the baby boomers aging into their disability-prone years, women entering the workforce in greater numbers in the 1970s and 1980s, and the increase in the retirement age – explain the bulk of recent program growth.

Unfortunately, several media reports on the Social Security disability programs have focused exclusively on one or more localities with relatively high rates of receipt of disability benefits, but have failed to note that these locations are statistical outliers, or to explore the readily understandable demographic reasons for which a higher share of the area's residents may qualify for benefits, leading readers to assume that they are the norm. Similarly, many stories have highlighted isolated cases of reported fraud, painting the entire programs with the brush of a few bad apples, without putting them in the broader context of the millions of individuals who receive benefits appropriately, and for whom they are a vital lifeline.

Additionally, little attention has been devoted to problems within the Social Security disability system that adversely impact claimants and beneficiaries with disabilities. For instance, due to many years of insufficient administrative funding for the Social Security Administration, many individuals with serious disabilities and terminal illnesses now face significant hardship due to the growing disability claims backlog. In 2010, *60 Minutes* aired an important and influential exposé on the Veterans Administration (VA) disability claims backlog and the often devastating effects of benefit delays. A balanced examination of the Social Security disability programs could draw similar attention to the rising disability claims backlog at the Social Security Administration – and the severe hardships that many applicants experience as a result – as well as the cumulative effects of administrative underfunding on the Social Security Administration's ability to administer its disability programs, including timely and accurate claims processing as well as important program integrity functions such as continuing disability reviews.

Finally, the single most authoritative source of information on the Social Security disability programs' policies, operations, and trends is without question the Social Security Administration itself. A thorough and complete presentation must include the perspective of the agency's officials and experts.

Media coverage has real consequences. Policy by anecdote has in the past led to significant and needless harm to Social Security disability beneficiaries. The wellbeing and economic security of millions of people with disabilities and their families – for whom Social Security disability benefits are nothing short of a lifeline – hang in the balance. We hope that *60 Minutes* will exercise appropriate caution in its reporting on these vital programs.

Very Truly Yours,

ADHD Aware  
The Advocacy Institute  
American Association on Health and Disability  
The Arc of the United States

Association of University Centers on Disabilities  
Autism National Committee  
Autistic Self Advocacy Network  
Council for Learning Disabilities  
Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund  
Easter Seals  
Health & Disability Advocates  
National Association of County Behavioral Health and Disability Directors  
National Association of Disability Representatives  
National Association of State Head Injury Administrators  
National Council on Independent Living  
National Disability Rights Network  
National Down Syndrome Congress  
National Organization of Social Security Claimants' Representatives  
National Respite Coalition  
Paralyzed Veterans of America  
Special Needs Alliance  
United Spinal Association  
World Institute on Disability

cc: Ingrid Ciprian-Matthews, Vice President for News  
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