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New Social Security Policy Benefits Youth Leaving Foster Care

Online Toolkit Now Available to Immediately Assist Families

(August 11, 2016) Philadelphia - A new policy from the Social Security Administration (SSA) went into effect on August 1st to allow foster youth of all ages with disabilities to apply for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits six months before they leave care. This policy will remain in effect for one year, after which SSA will evaluate its success and make any necessary modifications.

SSI is a federal needs-based program for children and adults with limited income and resources who are disabled, blind, or age 65 or older. Individuals who are eligible receive a monthly cash payment. The 2016 payment amount for an individual without any other income is \$733.

Community Legal Services, Juvenile Law Center, and Homeless Advocacy Project created a special toolkit to help qualifying persons take immediate advantage of this new policy and get the urgent support they need to make successful transitions. The toolkit will help guide foster youth with disabilities who are preparing to transition out of foster care and is available at www.jlc.org/SSI or www.clsphila.org/FosterCareSSI.

“Providing stability for these vulnerable youth as they leave care requires thoughtful planning and coordination among many different agencies and actors,” said Community Legal Services attorney and Independence Foundation Fellow Claire Grandison. “We commend the Social Security Administration for taking a leadership role in this process by changing its policies to better meet the unique needs of youth with disabilities in foster care. With this change, SSA takes a leadership role in supporting youth leaving foster care. We appreciate how receptive Acting Commissioner Carolyn Colvin and her staff have been to the needs of this population and how hard they have worked to develop and implement this policy quickly.”

“We know that foster youth with disabilities face a tremendous uphill battle as they prepare for adulthood and independence,” said Karen Lindell, an attorney at Juvenile Law Center. “By allowing foster youth to apply for SSI benefits six months before they leave care, this new policy will help avoid destabilizing gaps in support during critical transition periods. This increased stability can have lifelong benefits, as it allows these vulnerable young adults to focus on finishing school, learning a trade, or developing life skills, rather than on finding a place to sleep at night.”

Research shows that youth who have been in foster care are more likely to experience negative outcomes that include homelessness, unemployment, incarceration, and lack of access to health care. Almost 40% of youth who “age out” of the foster care system become homeless or “couch surf” at some point during young adulthood. Additionally, up to 80% of children and adolescents enter foster care with a significant mental health need, and one third have a chronic medical condition. Youth with disabilities have an even greater challenge as they prepare for adulthood. SSI benefits provide a vital source of income for these vulnerable youth as they transition out of care and onto their next step in life.

“Homeless Advocacy Project has spent the last 7 years representing youth aging out of the foster care system in their SSI disability claims through our expedited claims project called ‘[SOAR](#).’ We know firsthand how critical it is to start the claims process well before discharge in order to avoid youth homelessness,” said Homeless Advocacy Project attorney Laura Kolb.

This new policy can also help in reunifying families by providing an immediate source of additional financial support that many families need, thus reducing financial stresses. [In some states, the rate of failed reunifications is more than 25%](#). This new policy means that families will have income from SSI in place more quickly after reunification, easing the transition and reducing financial strain. Community Legal Services, Juvenile Law Center, and Homeless Advocacy Project advocated for this policy change, which will provide vital income to vulnerable youth as they transition out of foster care and attempt to establish stability at home or elsewhere.

For more information about this policy change, please visit www.jlc.org/SSI or www.clsphila.org/FosterCareSSI.