

'60 Minutes' tilted story for a Disability 'gotcha'

BY SUZANNE JOHNSON

It's hard to compete with "NFL Sunday Night Football." Maybe that explains the sensationalism of the recent outrageous story on "60 Minutes" about the Social Security Disability program.

The segment presented a single-sided story painting recipients of SSDI as frauds without interviewing a single one of them or any of the people who support them to tell their story. When U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn — an Oklahoma Republican — becomes the show's expert on SSDI, you know you're not getting a fair story.

It's frustrating. I work long hours working with individuals who, through no fault of their own, have developed an illness, injury or disease. Mainers are proud, hard-working people who don't ask for help easily. However, sometimes, you are put into a situation you did not anticipate and need to ask for help.

When someone unexpectedly become disabled through illness or injury and is no longer able to work, they can't buy groceries for the families or keep their homes in order. We all should be able to rely on the insurance we pay into, all of our working lives, to help us when we're disabled and unable to work. That insurance is Social Security Disability Insurance.

Sadly, a claim for benefits is often an uphill battle that can last for years before — and if — you are awarded a disability benefit.

But "60 Minutes" didn't interview anyone receiving benefits about the program, nor did they seek information from anyone who works for, or represents, the disabled.

In advance of the story, more than two dozen national disability advocacy organizations wrote to the show and provided them with facts about the program. "60 Minutes" didn't care; they had a



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more sensationalized story to tell, one that could distract viewers from "Sunday Night Football."

If the "60 Minutes" story was not irrational enough, now we have Gov. Paul LePage laying off our entire Maine Disability Determination Services office — 52 workers — thanks to the government shutdown.

This office serves to process and make determinations on SSDI claims, and these workers' salaries are funded by the Social Security Administration.

The system provides for an efficient review of a claim to determine who needs a benefit right away — for example, someone recently diagnosed with a fatal illness and therefore unable to work who does not qualify for a benefit; or perhaps a claimant who did not work enough years to qualify for a benefit; and those whose claim requires further review.

If this claim ultimately requires a hearing before an administrative law judge, that claim now can take two years to

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make its way through the system.

With the government shutdown, those two years are going to increase exponentially the longer the system is closed.

It's easy to criticize when you don't care to look at the facts.

The facts are that it is not easy to be awarded disability. No more than four in 10 applicants are approved for benefits.

For a claim to be approved requires extensive medical evidence. Doctors are called on to provide objective evidence — test results, lab reports — to support their diagnoses.

All of this work takes time and additional costs to the patient. Yet even when benefits are awarded, they are modest — approximately \$1,130 per month for SSDI recipients, just over the federal poverty limit.

But for someone unable to work, this modest benefit makes it possible for the disabled to maintain stable housing and purchase food and medications and other basic needs for themselves and their children.

SSDI is not a drag on the U.S. taxpayer. In fact, the disabled pay for the benefit they receive through payroll contributions that come out of each and every paycheck. When they hire someone to assist them with their disability claim — that, too, is paid only from benefits paid to the disabled person.

Mainers work hard and often in dangerous occupations. Once you lose your physical health in Maine, you often lose your job.

SSDI is an insurance product providing a critical lifeline for many Maine families. However, the lifeline has just been severed — and I fear for the lives that will be lost.

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