

The SSI Extension for Elderly and Disabled Refugees Act

Introduced by Representatives Jim McDermott and Jerry Weller

The bipartisan legislation (HR 2608), which passed the House by voice vote in July 2007, would extend Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits for disabled and elderly refugees who are legally residing in the United States. The cost of this extension would be completely offset by reducing federal tax refunds for individuals who have fraudulently claimed unemployment benefits. The bill was sent back to the House by the Senate in July 2008 with some modest modifications.

- ❑ The bill would generally extend SSI eligibility for two years for refugees, asylees, and other qualified humanitarian immigrants, including those who had benefits suspended in the past. Benefits could be extended for additional time for those awaiting a decision on a pending application for citizenship.
- ❑ These policies would be in effect for three years (FY 2009-2011). The legislation builds on similar proposals in recent Bush Administration budgets. Per an amendment added by the Senate, refugees would be required to sign an affidavit indicating they are making a good-faith effort to become citizens.
- ❑ Under current law, refugees lose their SSI eligibility after they have lived in the United States for seven years, unless they become citizens. SSI is often the primary source of income for these elderly and disabled refugees, who have fled political and/or religious persecution in their home countries. SSI maximum monthly benefits equal \$637 for an individual and \$956 for a couple in 2008.
- ❑ According to the Social Security Administration (SSA), roughly 20,000 refugees would have their benefits restored over the next three years under the bill.
- ❑ A primary barrier to citizenship within the seven-year period of SSI eligibility for refugees is lengthy delays in processing of citizenship applications. (An immigrant must live in the United States for at least five years before even applying for citizenship.)
- ❑ To offset the cost of the SSI extension, HR 2608 would reduce federal tax refunds to collect unemployment insurance (UI) debts resulting from fraud. Such tax refund offsets are already used to collect delinquent child support payments and debts owed to the federal government.