



Giffords blasts Social Security for stonewalling disability cases

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After Randall Burger's lifelong epilepsy became uncontrollable, the Oro Valley man applied for Social Security disability payments.

His claim was denied.

The federal agency turns down 64 percent of initial claims for disability, said U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz.

Her office stepped in to help Burger and his application was approved on appeal.

Giffords, in Tucson Tuesday to talk about the issue, said she is concerned about the "bureaucratic red tape" and what appears to be a "culture of denial" in the Social Security Administration.

Since she took office in January 2007, her office has looked into 45 Social Security disability cases for southern Arizonans whose claims had been denied.

Of those, 20 went to hearings and 19 were approved by judges based solely on the medical and vocational records provided by the applicants, Giffords said.

The average wait for a favorable outcome from the federal agency is more than 21 months, she said.

Some southern Arizonans faced mortgage foreclosure and vehicle repossession while struggling through the appeals process, she said.

"In most cases, those applying for disability benefits have been paying into the Social Security system for decades with the expectation that if they could no longer work due to a disability, the system would be there for them," Giffords said.

Burger was a buyer for a large corporation before his frequent daily seizures made it impossible for him to work.

She spoke at Craycroft Towers, a midtown Tucson apartment building.

In a Feb. 11 letter to Social Security Administration commissioner Michael J. Astrue about delayed and denied claims, Giffords wrote:

"Most disturbing was the number of people who were initially denied but later found to be disabled."

Even though funds have been set aside to hire more administrative judges to hear appeals, Giffords said the agency must do a better job evaluating the initial claims, rather than forcing more than half of applicants to go through the appeals process.

Astrue said in October 2007 the agency had "virtually eliminated a backlog of 63,770 disability hearing cases pending for 1,000 days or more to 108 cases at the end of September.

He said Arizona is one of several states using a Quick Disability Determination process, beginning last October, that uses a "predictive model" to analyze data in some claims and shorten the processing time to about 11 days. The QDD process was to be rolled out nationwide in 2008.

Mary Bauer, 51, of Sierra Vista, said her disability claim was initially denied by the federal agency after she became unable to work. Her ex-husband failed to provide child support and her son had to quit school to support them.

Bauer, in chronic pain from fibromyalgia, said it took two years for her application to be approved in January. Gifford's office stepped in a year ago. Bauer, a former corrections officer, said she had to choose between paying for garbage pickup or paying her water bill. The city took away her garbage can, she said.

"It was humiliating. I had to ask my neighbors if I could dump my trash in their garbage cans."