

## **Barriers Faced by People Experiencing Homelessness in Los Angeles when Filing Social Security Disability Appeals: A Qualitative and Community-Engaged Study**

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### **Key Findings and Policy Implications**

This paper examines barriers faced by people experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County when filing a Social Security disability program appeal after receiving an initial denial. It is a qualitative and community-engaged study that includes interviews with service providers and appellants who are currently or formerly unhoused or at imminent risk of losing their housing. Snowball sampling was used to reach service-connected appellants, and field interviews were conducted in Skid Row to reach non-service-connected interviewees. The paper finds that:

- People experiencing homelessness face heightened barriers remaining in contact with SSA and service providers. They experience significant confusion and frustration when navigating the appeals process.
- Interviewees reported that in most cases, claimants wait 2 to 3 years, or even longer, for their appeals case to be resolved. The long wait time increases the likelihood of health declines, remaining unhoused, and experiencing food insecurity.
- People experiencing homelessness receive lower quality healthcare, both exacerbating their chronic health conditions and leading to worse documentation of these conditions for disability determination. The delays in receiving benefits have additional negative effects on health and wellbeing.
- Claimants experience high levels of stress and depression due to delays receiving benefits and some reported that they may be more likely to use drugs due to the stress associated with delays receiving benefits. Administrative delays may generate additional negative externalities including increases in crime and drug use.

Over 75,500 people are unhoused in Los Angeles County and many live with severe disabilities. This qualitative study finds that this population faces many barriers to accessing public benefits, and that these barriers, in turn, negatively impact healthcare access, health, and other aspects of wellbeing. The findings indicate the importance of policies specifically tailored to the overlapping barriers facing people experiencing homelessness.

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