

The Difficulty of Finding and Accessing Public Benefit Programs

Applying and receiving publicly provided benefits is not as simple as filling out an application and submitting it. It is important note the effort it takes to find and enroll in these programs.

Accessing publicly provided benefit programs can be a time-consuming and bureaucratic process, which could deter enrollment.¹ While this bureaucracy is meant to prevent fraud and target benefits to intended groups, it can create significant obstacles to accessing benefits, often for those with the highest level of need. Just searching for benefit programs can be a lengthy process, which requires a basic understanding of how to find and contact a program, including knowing the program name and responsible agency.* However, this could be difficult for many seniors since 34 percent of seniors age 65 and older have little to no confidence in their ability to perform online tasks or use electronic devices.²

Programs may also have multiple options available that applicants must sort through to find their ideal plan. While having more choices could lead to better options, it could also leave applicants feeling overwhelmed and possibly enrolling in a more expensive program that is not the right fit.³ For instance, less than a quarter of applicants enroll in the best Medicare Part D prescription drug plan for their situation, which could raise their out-of-pocket costs by an average of \$300 a year.⁴

Also, some programs limit the number of enrollees while others do not. Programs with no enrollment caps are called entitlements, meaning that any eligible applicant receives the benefit.[†] Non-entitlement programs are limited by their budgets as to how many applicants can be served. However, applicants may not be aware that a non-entitlement program has hit its enrollment cap until after applying. Additionally, while individuals may only need to enroll in certain programs once, others require frequent reenrollments or periodic updates of any changes in their finances, health, or other aspects. For example, Medicare Part A only requires enrollees to sign up once, while Supplemental Security Income requires monthly wage reporting.⁵

If someone wants to discuss a program over the phone, they must find the correct agency and phone number, as well as navigate an automated phone system, which could be time consuming.[‡] When an applicant does reach a representative, the information provided may not always be accurate or complete.⁷ For example, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) noted that representatives of the 10 largest companies offering Medicare Part D prescription drug plans gave inaccurate or incomplete information in 51 percent of calls made by GAO.⁸

While many programs accept applications electronically, many applicants still choose to submit documentation by mail. For example, in 2019, almost 52 percent of Social Security Retirement Insurance applications were submitted by mail or in person.⁹ This could increase the time between application submission and benefit approval. Additionally, mailed items do not always make it to their destination. In Fiscal Year 2014 only, 88 million mailed items were not delivered.¹⁰ Of these, only 2.5 million were returned to customers.

In summary, finding, applying, and maintaining publicly provided benefits can be incredibly challenging for those who are not familiar with such programs. The process could be made even more difficult for seniors, who may have disabilities or decreased mental or physical abilities. As of 2019, two in every five seniors have a disability and almost 6 million Americans age 65 and older have Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia.¹¹ As previously noted, this difficulty could be a barrier to individuals applying and maintaining their enrollment in government provided benefit programs.

* However, some programs have multiple or more commonly known unofficial names. Some examples would include: Social Security, which is actually called Old-Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance; and the District's Homeowner/Renter Property Tax Income Tax Credit, also known as Schedule H or Property Tax Circuit Breaker.

† Examples of entitlement programs include federal and veteran pensions, Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and some tax credits and deductions.

‡ In FY 2019, the Social Security Administration noted that callers waited an average of 20 minutes to speak with a representative.

References

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