

Social Security Disability Benefits are Vital

As the nation distanced itself from the Jan. 1 "fiscal cliff" deadline and careened toward another nail-biting debate over the debt ceiling, "entitlement reform" again became the mantra of Capitol Hill. While lawmakers tend to refer to "entitlements" in general terms, they are typically understood to include Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security benefits.

Thanks to the deal lawmakers recently reached to suspend limitations on government borrowing until spring, we may have to wait a little longer to learn whether entitlement reform will play into the debt ceiling debate. And if Social Security disability benefits are bundled into any entitlement reform, Western New York may have more at stake in the debt ceiling debate than many currently recognize.

Between December 2006 and December 2011, demand for Social Security benefits among disabled workers has grown faster in the Western New York, Finger Lakes and North Country regions than New York's seven other economic development regions, according to U.S. Social Security Administration data analyzed by the law firm Tully Rinckey PLLC in Buffalo.

The income provided by this federally administered program has a positive impact not only on disabled workers with back problems or heart conditions but also on the local economy. In December 2011, in Western New York alone, Social Security payments to disabled worker beneficiaries totaled \$58 million - \$16.5 million more than six years earlier.

During the six-year period, disabled worker beneficiary growth was most robust in the Finger Lakes, increasing by 28.29 percent to 40,660 recipients. Western New York followed with a 25.03 percent increase to 52,725, and then the North Country experienced a 24.99 percent increase to 16,730. Meanwhile, the statewide average six-year increase in beneficiaries was 21.65 percent to 506,939.

Social Security disability benefits provide income that is vital to disabled workers who are no longer able to perform any substantial gainful activity due to a medically determined mental or physical impairment. These benefits allow beneficiaries, whose payroll taxes went toward the disability insurance fund during their working years, to maintain a standard of living.

Not only were the ranks of disabled worker beneficiaries growing the fastest in Western New York, the Finger Lakes and the North Country, these three regions were the only ones to see their share of New York's beneficiary population significantly increase. For example, 10.4 percent of New York's disabled worker beneficiaries were located in Western New York in 2011, compared to 10.12 percent in 2006. Meanwhile, Long Island's share declined to 13.04 percent from 13.63 percent, with the Southern Tier's share remaining unchanged.

It is hard to say why the ranks of disabled worker beneficiaries are growing so fast in the Upstate regions, compared to others across the state. Social Security Administration statistics do not specify the impairments of disabled workers in New York counties. Nationally, 29 percent of beneficiaries suffer from a musculoskeletal or connective tissue impairment and 32.3 percent suffer from a mental disorder. It's possible that the demand for Social Security

disability benefits is strong due to a combination of the region's staple industries and a recovering, but still not fully recovered, job market. The debt ceiling deadline remains on the horizon. Whether entitlement reform will be a component of an agreement remains to be seen, but it is important for New York's congressional delegation to recognize that Social Security disability benefits are a vital source of income for a growing number of Upstate disabled workers.