



PROMOTING SSI



Toolkit for Communicators

For Justice in Aging
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STRATEGIC OVERVIEW



As Justice in Aging works, along with its allies, to make the most compelling case possible for SSI, it needs information both about current public perceptions, and about the kinds of communications approaches that are most likely to engage interest, stick with people, and shift thinking in constructive directions.

This Toolkit offers key insights in these areas, based on 21 in-depth telephone interviews (“cognitive elicitations”), a set of over 100 ethnographic conversations in several parts of the country, and online “TalkBack” testing with a diverse group of over 800 Americans. (See the full report for more detail on the research approach.)



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Universal Default Support

While most members of the public are unaware of the SSI program—either by name or in concept—they are very supportive of the idea once they hear it described. A brief, simple description is enough to elicit positive, even enthusiastic responses—when it focuses on the core idea that certain situations/conditions make it unreasonable to expect people to support themselves.

Problematic Perspectives

On the other hand, initial positive responses do not guarantee solid support. A number of factors can end up eroding it and derailing conversations.

Us/them divide: There is a strong and consistent tendency for research participants to talk about SSI recipients as a separate group of people—“they,” “them”—even when attitudes are supportive. This kind of distancing can ultimately lead to problems such as lack of engagement with the topic, or even negative judgments.

Defaulting to a focus on those who COULD support themselves:

Default perceptions about work, personal responsibility, money, health and so forth, combine to cause people to repeatedly slip into thinking that focuses on people who “should be working” and who actually do not fit the SSI criteria. (This is an example of what Topos calls the current “cultural common sense” working against us.)

Default skepticism about “able-bodied” recipients: Despite evolving attitudes about mental health, the cultural common sense continues to frame the ability to work in terms of physical capacities—leading people to default to an assumption that people who are physically sound should not receive aid.

Preference for strict rules: Even those inclined toward sympathy and support often focus on strict rules to prevent “cheating” and so forth.

Dislike of cash “handouts”: Even sympathetic Americans tend to feel less supportive as they think about benefits in the form of cash, as opposed to services that might be less likely to allow misuse.

Due to a combination of such factors, conversations can start out positive and supportive but end up taking a more skeptical turn. In short, there is still a strong need for an effective communications approach to build more robust support for the program.

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Recommended Communications Approach

The following elements will help communicators engage interest and support, and help inoculate against unproductive thinking. (Later sections are full of sample language for making these points.)

Can't be expected to earn a living: The most important core point is reminders about who/what SSI is for, i.e. reinforcement that this is about situations/conditions where people can't reasonably be expected to provide for themselves through work. Straightforward language like "unable to work to meet their basic needs" or "impossible for them to support themselves" is very helpful. (See note below about not de-meaning recipients.) This emphasis essentially explains why we built SSI (a concrete and empowering way to frame creation of the policy).

Sample situations: To reinforce the point about who is and isn't eligible, communicators should offer two or three quick, easy-to-understand examples of cases illustrating who SSI is intended to benefit.

Needs Updating: Rather than take a "defensive" stance about why SSI shouldn't be cut, it is more helpful to "play offense" by arguing that SSI should be strengthened. More specifically: Due to outdated (40-year-old) rules and limits, SSI creates unnecessary financial challenges and hardships. This practical point is memorable and compelling for people across the political spectrum.

Keeping people out: Finally, it is effective to make the following point: The program as it stands emphasizes keeping people out more than providing help. This idea inoculates against the default concern that programs like SSI may be offering help to people who don't need or deserve it.

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Additional considerations

There are a number of other points and questions it is helpful to keep in mind.

Not demeaning recipients: Due to American perspectives about work, personal responsibility and other topics, it might sound (even to allies) as though we are demeaning recipients when we point out that they cannot support themselves through work. Communicators should use their own sensitivity and judgment when navigating how to make the core point about who is eligible for SSI. For instance, it may help to frame the idea in terms of reasonable expectations, so that judgments are essentially about audiences. (“No reasonable person could expect someone in situation X to earn a living through work ...”)

The role of “moral” arguments: While there is no downside to pointing out that we shouldn’t abandon people, for instance, moral arguments aren’t enough, on their own, to inoculate against traps. Practical arguments strike people as newer and are more memorable and convincing.

SSI helps everyone: Audiences inevitably focus mostly on how SSI benefits recipients, but it is still a good idea to include secondary points about broader benefits, e.g. the economy is better off when people have enough to get by; any of us might potentially need it down the road.

Critiquing government: While it is important not to reinforce skepticism about the idea that public policy can be effective, the recommended strategy does point out ways that programs can be improved. Communicators need to walk this line carefully.

Demographic differences: The recommendations are featured because they proved to be broadly resonant across demographic groups, but communicators should feel free to create nuanced messaging for different audiences. In particular, this toolkit is designed to help communicators reach broad audiences who may currently know little about the issue, but who can be engaged to support the program. For more specific audiences, such as those already strongly committed to SSI or related policies, the recommended strategy is still helpful, but can be tailored accordingly.

CHECKLIST

The following is a convenient checklist of core points communicators can use to confirm that materials are on-strategy.

- ✓ Clarified/emphasized that SSI is for people with situations/conditions that make it impossible to fully support themselves through work?
- ✓ Offered 2 or 3 quick, clear examples of the kinds of people/families/situations SSI is for?
- ✓ Framed SSI as a program “we built/created”
- ✓ Made practical points about the need to improve/strengthen SSI?
 - Stated clearly how 40-year-old rules are no longer appropriate, and push things in the wrong directions?
 - Made it clear the program is set up more to keep people out than to provide the help it was designed for?
- ✓ Careful to emphasize improvements we can make rather than just attacks/criticisms of the program (which could reinforce anti-government attitudes)?
- ✓ State/imply that SSI has broad benefits that go beyond (current) recipients?
- ✓ Considered whether language might be demeaning to recipients?

SAY THIS, NOT THIS

The following table illustrates short statements that are on-strategy, compared with other ways of addressing the topic.

ON THIS POINT,	SAY THIS...	NOT THIS.	NOTES
Basic rationale for SSI	SSI is for those who may be unable to earn enough to meet their basic needs or for whom it is impossible to work.	It is important to help those who are neediest in our society.	Clearly defined purpose, rather than broad moral appeal
Defining who receives SSI	Maybe in your own life you know someone who has a child with a serious disability like cerebral palsy, or a blind person unable to work. These are the kinds of situations we built SSI for.	SSI is essential help for elderly and disabled people.	Offer brief, relatable, concrete examples of situations (not necessarily actual individuals)
Pointing out inadequacies of SSI	SSI's rules haven't been updated in 40 years and the outdated rules and limits actually push people down.	SSI is a broken system that doesn't work.	Emphasize specific, fixable shortcomings rather than broad condemnations
Rules and requirements	SSI currently emphasizes keeping people out more than providing help.	SSI has strict limits that prevent cheating and fraud.	Play "offense" not "defense"—the program should help MORE people
Out-of-date rules	If you have more than \$2000 in savings you can't get benefits, so the program prevents people from putting money aside for emergencies or future expenses.	Unreasonable financial eligibility requirements can incentivize recipients not to work.	Emphasize savings rather than work

SAMPLE QUOTES

THE FOLLOWING SHORT STATEMENTS ILLUSTRATE ADDITIONAL WAYS OF EMBEDDING THE STRATEGY INTO COMMUNICATIONS.

“SSI is a supplement to the Social Security system that provides some very modest financial assistance for people who are unable to work to meet their basic needs, such as a family with a child with cerebral palsy, a 30-year-old blind man with no savings, or an 80-year-old retired couple who had unexpected medical costs and are facing homelessness.”

“SSI provides a bit of financial assistance for children with disabilities, blind people, those too old to work, and others with mental or physical challenges that make it impossible to support themselves.”

“Right now SSI is set up more to keep people out than it is to provide help. Many people who should qualify get their applications denied. And many who are eventually accepted have to wait years and go through several appeals before getting any benefits. We need to work together to update SSI rules, so complicated red tape doesn’t prevent people from getting the help they need.”

“SSI rules haven’t been updated for over 40 years, and can end up making people’s financial problems worse. For example, if you have more than \$2,000 in savings you can’t get benefits, so the program prevents people from putting money aside for emergencies or future expenses. We need to update SSI so that it stops keeping people down.”

“SSI was created to help people who are unable to work, such as an elderly widow with a low income and rising medical bills or an individual with severe mental health challenges.”

“If you are able to work just a little bit, you shouldn’t have your benefits cut. Consider Aerius, a 32-year-old father of three with cerebral palsy living and working in Idaho. He would like to earn a bit to build up his savings, but if he has more than \$2,000 in assets, he will lose his SSI benefits.”

“Maybe in your own life you know someone who has a child with cerebral palsy, or a blind person unable to work. These are the kinds of situations we built SSI for. To help in situations where it is impossible for people to support themselves.”

“We established the SSI program because a modern, decent civilization doesn’t let our elderly poor and those unable to work be forced into the streets. We all get the benefits of living in a country with a more stable economy, lower crime, and hope for future generations.”

SAMPLE TWEETS AND HASHTAGS

THE FOLLOWING ARE SAMPLES OF QUICK WAYS OF MAKING POINTS THAT FIT THE RECOMMENDED STRATEGY.

#SSI provides modest but vital benefits to a low-income parent raising a child with CP or a 30-year-old blind man with no savings.

Let's update #SSI so 40-year-old policy doesn't keep out people who need it.

Saving a little money for an emergency should NOT mean losing #SSI benefits.

Folks unable to work to meet basic needs need #SSI.

After 40 years, let's update #SSI rules.

#SSI is set up more to keep people out than to help. Many who qualify are denied or wait years, go through appeals before getting benefits.

Know someone who has a child with CP or a blind person who can't make ends meet? #SSI provides modest help when needed.

#SSI is a safety net we built to protect us all in case something happens and we can't work enough to meet basic needs.

#SSI rules are outdated. If you have \$2k in savings you can't get benefits, so you can't put money aside for emergencies.

What if you're in your 80s, unable to work, savings wiped out by bills? We built #SSI for these situations!

Update #SSI rules to meet today's needs. if you can work a little to save \$, but not enough to get by, benefits shouldn't be cut.

#SSI = basic security for blind, disabled, elderly who CAN'T meet basic needs thru work.

Hashtags might include ones that connect to broader and/or timely topics—
e.g. #Children #SafetyNet #PersonsWithDisability #RetirementSecurity

Or they can be new hashtags specific to campaigns about this issue—
e.g. #UpdateSSI #UpgradeSSI #SSIstrong #SSIhelps

SAMPLE PIVOTS

The following are examples of how communicators could respond when confronted with questions from the public or media that challenge SSI or undermine the program. The goal is to get back to our own framing rather than dwell on the perspective implied in the question.

Don't we already have other programs that support low-income or disabled people?

SSI is modest help for people with very limited means, in specific situations that prevent them from earning a living—[INSERT EXAMPLES]. It is often the only program that provides a bit of money to help make ends meet.

Most federal programs are plagued by lots of fraud. Presumably that's true of SSI as well?

Actually, SSI has the opposite problem. It is currently set up more to keep people out than to provide the help it was designed for. Many, many people who should qualify are denied, or have to go through years of appeals to get benefits. If there *are* any cheaters in the SSI system, they are way outnumbered by the people who need benefits and aren't getting them. We need to update the program so that it works as intended.

How does SSI encourage people to get back to work?

SSI is specifically focused on conditions and situations that make it impossible to survive through work—autism, cerebral palsy, blindness, advanced age, etc. Some recipients are able to work a little, but most can't work at all.

If SSI is so flawed, should we just get rid of it?

For many people with severe disabilities and so forth, SSI is the only safety net between them and homelessness or starvation. There are some simple fixes that would let SSI provide the help it was intended for when we created it 40 years ago.

SSI recipients are collecting money they put into the system, right?

No. Since we created SSI specifically for conditions and situations where it's impossible for someone to survive through work—autism, cerebral palsy, blindness, etc.—these are mostly people who have never been able to pay into the system. In fact, many who qualify are children with disabilities, who have obviously never worked.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STRATEGY

The following are examples of how communicators can respond to questions colleagues and allies may have about the strategy.

What's the best way to describe the people who get SSI benefits without sounding critical of people who cannot work to support themselves?

The challenge here is that one of the most important facts to convey and reinforce is that people only qualify if they definitely have situations/conditions that make it impossible for them to support themselves through work. Language like this puts emphasis on an objective and practical assessment of what is and isn't possible. Communicators may arrive at different ways of making the point respectfully—but should also remember that there is nothing inherently disrespectful about pointing out a legitimate need, though language may sometimes seem demeaning if viewed through particular American culture lenses.

We're used to talking about how SSI benefits everyone—is that still OK to do?

Yes. The research established that it is difficult for people to put their primary focus on broad benefits, since the specific situations are so concrete and compelling. But that said, it is a good idea to additionally/secondarily point out broader benefits, partly to continue to reinforce that public policy should always ultimately be about promoting the common good.

What about the moral arguments, like we shouldn't abandon people who can't help themselves?

These are compelling, and are why people tend to support SSI by default. But when we make them the primary focus they don't do much to inoculate against the various traps, such as erroneous thinking about who the program is for, concerns about cheating, etc.

Does this approach run the risk of sounding critical of government?

If not handled well, critiques of the program could potentially reinforce general skepticism about government and policy. This is why the strategy recommends reinforcing the purpose of SSI (why we built/created it), and making it clear that there are concrete improvements that would make it (even) more effective.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STRATEGY

Is it helpful to link SSI to the really popular Social Security program?

This research didn't uncover any particular patterns related to whether Social Security is mentioned. It definitely appears helpful, though, to treat SSI as its own, distinct program, when the goal is to promote SSI per se. This framing allows for a clearer and more focused conversation. Note that it is a separate question how to handle SSI when a communication is focused on Social Security. In this case, given the popularity of Social Security, mentioning SSI may provide some additional lift to the latter program.

Shouldn't we point out that the benefits don't really lift people out of poverty?

The most effective ways to talk about the level of help SSI provides are to point out that A) the help is modest, and B) the program hasn't been updated much since it was created 40 years ago. A direct focus on "poverty" probably brings up unhelpful questions and associations.

What about "putting a face on the issue" and telling personal stories?

As discussed earlier, it is important to list some categories of situations that qualify people/families for SSI. But there are some risks associated with focusing on specific individuals. E.g. this kind of storytelling can sometimes invite a counterproductive focus on irrelevant details (Can't her extended family help her out? Why didn't that senior couple put more money aside? Etc. For additional discussion see Topos's ["Close Up vs. Big Picture Stories."](#)