

Kentucky Social Security recipients commit suicide after benefits cut

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Hundreds of Social Security recipients in eastern Kentucky are threatened with the loss of their federal disability benefits in the new year, nearly a year after some 1,500 people were ordered to attend hearings to re-certify their eligibility. Several people have committed suicide due to the cuts, with additional risks lingering as the threat of further cuts looms.

Dozens gathered January 14 in Prestonsburg, in Floyd County, to meet with a legal team assembled to represent the impoverished residents. Attorney Ned Pillersdorf, who heads the legal counsel, told reporters at the meeting that several people have said they would kill themselves if they lost their benefits.

At least three recipients committed suicide last June after receiving benefit termination letters.

“The suicide chatter is way up,” Pillersdorf said Thursday night. “It was especially bad around Christmas. Unfortunately people have got this unfortunate response that suicide is somehow a rational response to losing their benefits. We want to reassure people their lawyers are doing everything they can to help them.”

Around 1,000 disability recipients have no legal representation for their re-certification hearings, and Pillersdorf said it was likely that they could lose their cases as a result.

The hearings are part of a federal fraud investigation targeting eastern Kentucky and southwestern West Virginia, one of the poorest areas of the United States.

The Social Security Administration announced a mass suspension in May of last year that cut disability benefits to 900 residents in eastern Kentucky. Another 600 recipients also received letters warning that their eligibility was under review.

The letters were sent out after a Congressional investigation accused Kentucky attorney Eric C. Conn

and former judge David B. Daugherty of fraud in the cases. A 2013 US Senate investigation alleged that Conn’s office relied on medical evidence from doctors who did not properly examine some beneficiaries, and accused Daugherty of rubber-stamping the cases with little scrutiny. Conn and Daugherty came under scrutiny after a report on CBC’s 60 Minutes alleged that the law firm was paid millions of dollars in attorneys’ fees and was pushing illegitimate claims through the system.

The federal suspension letters sent beneficiaries, many of whom subsist exclusively on the paltry monthly payments, into a panic.

Posting a Facebook update on May 31, Pillersdorf sounded an alarm about clients’ despondency. “Very concerned about some of the extremely distressed messages I have been receiving,” he wrote. “Don’t hesitate to contact medical professional if feeling too overwhelmed. Fully realize how serious this is.”

Two days later, Pillersdorf wrote: “The first client who contacted me about this fiasco committed suicide yesterday ... please if you are feeling overwhelmed contact a medical professional—or call a suicide hotline...” By later that evening, the attorney said two others had died by their own hands.

Pillersdorf filed a wrongful death lawsuit in Floyd County Circuit Court on behalf of the beneficiaries, stating that the Social Security Administration violated due process by cutting benefits without hearings for recipients. The lawsuit, which named Conn and his law firm in addition to the SSA, was dismissed on August 6. Conn has not been charged with a crime, and has denied any wrongdoing.

There is no evidence that individuals whose benefits have been suspended are committing fraud. In many cases, the claimants are former workers in coal and

lumber, physically demanding industries that have high rates of injuries and chronic conditions. “Never have so many economically vulnerable people, in one of the most economically distressed areas of our nation, had to endure as much turmoil, economic uncertainty, suicides and distress,” Pillersdorf commented in a court motion.

Leroy Burchett, 41, was one of Conn’s former clients who committed suicide after receiving the suspension notice. His wife, Emma, said his monthly check amounted to \$1,036. A disabled worker for Tri State Guardrail, Burchett depended on the checks after suffering significant physical injuries six years ago, according to the legal complaint. Without the payments, he could not afford antidepressants or other basic care. He became despondent, and shot and killed himself.

Melissa Jude also died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound after receiving the suspension letter. On June 2, the day she died, she had gone to the doctor to try to retrieve medical proof of her disability. The doctor told her it would take longer than the 10-day deadline that the federal investigation had imposed on clients to file for an appeal. After leaving the office, Jude pulled over onto the shoulder of the road and shot herself.

Most of the people being reviewed for benefits cannot afford an attorney. Appalachian Research and Defense Fund of Kentucky Executive Director Robert Johns said the agency has been deluged with unprecedented numbers of requests for help, and about 80 attorneys have been working without compensation to help.

More than 8 percent of residents in Kentucky and West Virginia receive disability checks. In Floyd County, 11 percent of the population receives the benefit. In Kentucky’s 5th Congressional District, located in the eastern part of the state, roughly a quarter of the area’s 715,000 people draw some sort of Social Security benefits, including retirement and disability checks.



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