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Continuous Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Benefits for Disabled Foster Youth

Background

In California, approximately 4,000 foster youth emancipate out of the foster care system each year without a permanent home or source of support. An estimated 15-20 percent of “aging out” foster youth are eligible for federal disability benefits, called Supplemental Security Income (SSI). SSI benefits are a potentially significant source of income for eligible foster youth who are about to leave foster care and have no other income. CDSS and legislative sponsors of AB 1331 (Evans), including The John Burton Foundation and Public Interest Law Project, convened a workgroup with the Social Security Administration (SSA), which oversees the federal SSI benefit program. Through this workgroup the State successfully negotiated an improved process to allow foster youth to apply for SSI benefits up to a year before they leave foster care. Under previous policies governing the SSI determination process, “aging out” foster youth were forced to wait until after leaving foster care before they could apply.

Unprecedented Federal Approval Changes SSI Process

In January 2008, CDSS received federal approval from the SSA to allow disabled foster youth to apply for SSI benefits before they turn 18 years of age and up to 12 months before they exit out of foster care. This policy shift enabled California to move forward with implementing AB 1331, in which the State’s counties can transfer a foster youth’s case from federal foster care benefits to state foster care benefits for one month to allow the SSA to accept and process an SSI application before a foster youth exits foster care. Previous policy only allowed a foster youth to apply one month before his/her 18th birthday. However, the determination process would take 6-9 months, leaving “aged-out” youth without benefits. The new process ensures eligible foster youth can receive federal disability payments before they exit foster care. Together, CDSS and SSA found a workable solution that will better serve the foster youth population in California. In early 2010, the SSA issued a Program Operation Manual System (POMS) directive nationwide that allows a process similar to California’s to be applied in all 50 states.

Key Benefits of the New SSI Process

- Provides foster youth with an important source of continual benefits and support.
- 674 cases have been received for processing from June 1, 2008 – March 31, 2010.
- \$1,086 is the maximum grant amount for a disabled individual.
- \$907 is the maximum grant amount to a disabled individual living independently.
- FY 2008-09 average grant amount for disabled individual was \$635.