

(Ross Township, PA) - U.S. Congressman Jason Altmire (PA-4) and Allison Park resident Jean Sbaraglia today held a press conference to highlight growing concerns that valid disability claims are being denied by Social Security examiners. A recent CBS News report found that two out of every three federal disability benefit applications are rejected. Anecdotally, over 30 former examiners in 14 states said there is pressure to reject disability claims, because once their claims are denied, many people stop seeking assistance. Those who do file an appeal wait 520 days on average for a hearing.

“American workers pay into Social Security with the understanding that they are contributing to their future financial safety net. The possibility that many people with valid claims for federal disability assistance are being denied help is outrageous,” Altmire said.

“Congress has asked the Social Security Administration to review this situation and work toward devising ways to ensure people like Jean Sbaraglia can access the help they need in a timely manner.”

Allison Park resident Jean Sbaraglia has experienced first hand the financial hardship that comes with having a valid disability claim rejected. In August 2005, Sbaraglia developed several chronic health problems that made it impossible for her to continue working. After undergoing three operations, Sbaraglia reluctantly applied for federal disability benefits. She and her doctors were shocked when her claim was rejected.

As Sbaraglia's financial situation worsened, she filed an appeal, only to be told that it could take years for her case to be heard. Sbaraglia then contacted Congressman Altmire's office, where a caseworker helped expedite her hearing. Once a local judge saw her case, he immediately ruled that Sbaraglia's claim was valid and should have been accepted when first filed. Altmire's office continues to work today to ensure Sbaraglia receives the back payments owed to her.

“I did not even apply for Social Security at first because I was told that unless I was totally incapacitated, I would be denied. But after having three major surgeries, I had to apply for assistance because I could no longer work,” Sbaraglia said. **“Having my claim for disability assistance denied initially was devastating and further increased my financial burdens. Had I not finally gotten the assistance I needed, my children and I would have lost our home.”**

In the past year, Congress has taken some action to alleviate the backlog of social security cases. Additional funding was included in the final FY 2008 budget to reduce the backlog of cases and the waiting times for hearings. Congressman Altmire has also cosponsored the BRAVE Act (HR 2943) which would reduce the disability claims backlog by allowing veterans rated as 100 percent disabled to automatically receive benefits.

Congressman Altmire encourages individuals who need assistance to contact his district office in Aliquippa at 724-378-0928. A caseworker can investigate the status of a Social Security claim and may be able to help expedite the process.