



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Five-Minute Floor Statement as Prepared for Delivery
Introduction of *Supplemental Security Income Equality Act*
April 15, 2015

Mr. Speaker:

Today I am re-introducing a bill to extend the Supplemental Security Income program, known as SSI, to Puerto Rico—as well as to Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands and American Samoa. Of all the disparities that Puerto Rico faces because it is a territory, and not a state, few are as morally egregious and practically damaging as its exclusion from SSI.

SSI provides monthly cash assistance to blind, disabled or elderly individuals who have limited or no income. We are talking about the most vulnerable members of our society. SSI applies in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. However, since the program's inception in 1974, it has not been extended to Puerto Rico. Instead, the federal grant program known as Aid to the Aged, Blind, and Disabled, or AABD, applies in Puerto Rico.

The Social Security Administration sends monthly SSI payments directly to beneficiaries, whereas the AABD program is administered by the Puerto Rico government, using an annual block grant provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The gap between the treatment that is provided to beneficiaries in the 50 states under SSI and the treatment that is provided to their fellow American citizens in Puerto Rico under AABD is, in a word, shocking.

According to the most recent federal statistics, the average SSI payment to beneficiaries is \$540 a month and close to \$650 a month for beneficiaries who are under the age of 18.

By contrast, based on the most recent data that has been furnished to my office, the AABD block grant that the federal government provides to the Puerto Rico government is only \$33 million a year. With this limited funding, the Puerto Rico government provides an average payment to adult beneficiaries of just \$74 a month. Let me repeat that: \$540 a month in the states versus \$74 a month in Puerto Rico.

To add insult to injury, the Puerto Rico government is legally required to meet a 25 percent “match” in order to receive its AABD block grant. The states, obviously, do not have to make any matching payments for their residents to receive SSI assistance.

In 2014, the GAO estimated that, if Puerto Rico were a state, it would receive up to \$1.8 billion a year under SSI. That is 54 times as much as the territory receives annually under AABD. Again, let me repeat that: 54 times greater. The GAO estimated that, if Puerto Rico were a state, 300,000 islands residents would qualify for SSI payments. Under the current AABD program, only 35,000 individuals receive assistance.

Thus, Puerto Rico's exclusion from the SSI program means that the territory's government cannot provide decent monthly payments to residents who cannot support themselves. It also means that the territory's government cannot assist many extraordinarily needy residents at all.

Those who seek proof of how Puerto Rico is harmed by its territory status need look no further than the treatment it receives under SSI. Those who want to comprehend why roughly 240,000 island residents relocated to the states between 2010 and 2014 in search of better quality of life should realize that Puerto Rico's unequal treatment under key federal programs—including, but not limited to, SSI—is a major factor contributing to this migration.

Let me be crystal clear on this point: those politicians in Puerto Rico and the states who defend Puerto Rico's current status must accept the undeniable truth that this status is harming the people of Puerto Rico. If you rationalize or excuse Puerto Rico's territory status, you are complicit in Puerto Rico's mistreatment.

But make no mistake. The era of inequality is coming to an end. I stand side-by-side with a large and growing army of proud U.S. citizens from Puerto Rico who refuse to accept such shameful treatment any longer. We believe in full equality for Puerto Rico under the American flag. We will fight for it until we achieve it. And we will achieve it soon.