Project Title – Exploring Barriers to Disability Program and SSI Program Participation for the Visually Impaired Community

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Focal Area 2. Addressing Barriers to Disability Program and SSI Program Participation. For more than a decade, applications for DI and SSI benefits have been falling at a faster pace than originally projected based on actuarial models. However, the causes of this rapid decline are less well understood. SSA encourages studies that examine the possible drivers of this decline and the impact it has had on our programs and populations. We are particularly interested in studies that identify barriers that may either keep eligible individuals from applying initially or that make it difficult for them to complete the application and appeals processes.

Brief Abstract – According to the National Eye Institute, there are over 825,000 Black/African American people who have diabetic retinopathy. The number is expected to increase to more than 1 million by 2030. While this does not include other causes for visual impairment among the Black/African population, the number is staggering. Individuals living with a visual impairment encounter challenges navigating daily tasks, even those that may otherwise seem simple. Improvements with technology is helpful. However, there still remains the need for the visually impaired to seek benefits through the Social Security Disability Program.

Understanding the application process can be daunting and time consuming. For instance, the National Federation of the Blind is a membership and advocacy organization of blind people. Although programs and services are available, access to locations, and providing support to help clients gather proper documentation in a timely manner can prevent them from being a viable alternative. Another organization is the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS). The mission of this organization is to "provide leadership and support in promoting the employment,

economic self-sufficiency, and independence of individuals with disabilities." In Prince George's County, this organization is heavily relied on as a support organization for the blind community. This research will explore the perceptions and attitudes of visually impaired persons in Prince George's County regarding applying for benefits from the Social Security Administration. The overarching research question is participants to share their experience about applying for Disability Program benefits.

This study will use a qualitative methodology to explore the specific barriers that the visually impaired community encounter in completing the application process for Social Security Disability benefits. It will include examining obstacles including but not limited to awareness regarding the process, access to support organizations, transportation, fees, and time constraints. Additionally, this study is prepared to begin immediately with the following in sequence: Identify and mentor Research Assistants (RAs), submit IRB approval, gather data through focus groups and individual interviews, analyze data, submit data for member checking, circulate first draft for comments, and finally submit paper to NBER.