

**Statement of Julian Blair
Retiree, Veteran, Social Security Beneficiary**

HEARING ON “EQUITY IN SOCIAL SECURITY: IN THEIR OWN WORDS”

**United States House of Representatives
Committee on Ways and Means
Social Security Subcommittee**

June 15, 2021

Chairman Larson, Ranking Member Reed, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to share my Social Security story with you. My name is Julian Blair, and I am a retiree living in Washington, D.C. I was born in Caroline County Virginia and began contributing to Social Security when I was 15, while working at the local tomato factory during the summer months. I continued to earn my Social Security benefits while defending this great nation as a member of the United States Air Force and Army. After 23 years of service, including combat time in Thailand during the Vietnam War, I retired from the military and continued my career in a number of positions at Corning Glass Works.

Today, Social Security is a crucial part of my income. Yet, I must tell you: Though I worked and contributed my entire life, my Social Security benefit is far too low to cover my monthly expenses. In fact, my Social Security doesn't even cover my entire rent. Thankfully, because of my military service, I also receive a military pension. So, I do okay, but not everyone is so fortunate. I am concerned about my family, friends and neighbors – and millions like them—who are trying to live on Social Security alone.

In my own family, my stepdad worked for forty-two years. He worked extremely hard. He always had two jobs – a full-time and a part-time job. He was a prideful man who believed, “I can take care of my family. I can do the things that I need to do to make sure that I'm a good citizen.” When he retired, his Social Security, his savings and his other income weren't enough, and he had to go back to work. He could not make it. I watched this man cry because his dignity was gone. It was so hard to watch what he went through.

On top of that, his widow, my mother, could not make ends meet with her small Social Security widow's benefit. Fortunately, my four brothers and I supported her as best we could. But not everyone has five sons to depend on. We were happy to take care of our mother, but my mother felt like she was a burden on us, and no one ever wants to feel like they're a burden. We have Social Security because not everyone has children who can help them out and even those who do, don't want to feel like a burden. All of us are happy to contribute and earn our Social Security, modest though the benefits are, because we know we earned those benefits.

After all those years of working and contributing, it would be great if benefits were more adequate so that my mother and others could feel secure. Unfortunately, Congress has not increased Social Security benefits for half a century, but they have, as you know, raised the retirement age, making the benefits worth not quite as much. And while the once-a-year cost of living adjustment helps, our Social Security simply doesn't keep up with increases in the cost of medicine, doctor visits, and so many other expenses that we all have.

Social Security has not only been important for retirees in my family. It was also a lifeline for my brother who worked for years as a social worker. In his late forties, he had to leave the workforce due to chronic pain. His only income for decades was Social Security's disability benefits. Eventually he got a small pension from his time working for the state of Maryland, but without Social Security, he would have had nothing.

Over the years, I have met countless retirees and others who would have been destitute without their Social Security. Yet, even with Social Security, some people cannot afford to pay their light bill or, worse, pay rent. I recall one woman, a grandmother, who happily bought her grandkids brand new pencils at the start of each school year. It was her special treat, one her grandchildren looked forward to every year. She did that every year until her Social Security stopped keeping up with all of her expenses and that was the one luxury she could reluctantly give up. Another woman I know, from Maryland, had been retired for 15 years, until at the age of 87 she had to go back to work, because her income could not cover her basic needs. We're not talking about vacations or a fancy car, but necessities: food, medicine, rent.

I am thankful for the leadership of President Biden, Vice President Harris, Chairman Larson and the others in Congress who are fighting to protect and expand Social Security. Increasing Social Security benefits won't make people rich, but it would give them dignity. No one wants to feel insecure. No one wants to continuously live on the brink of disaster.

Too many of our fellow Americans do live on the brink of disaster. Once a month I volunteer to distribute food in Montgomery County, Maryland, one of the richest counties in the United States. There I met a woman who told me that her Social Security runs out the last week of each month. Just a 20 dollar increase in Social Security would mean she could buy food for that last week.

And, if benefits were cut, even more people would face disaster. With all due respect, I believe it is beyond time for all of Congress to get behind expanding, and not cutting, Social Security's invaluable benefits. These stories I shared today are not just isolated to my family and my neighbors. Our stories represent the stories of over 64 million Social Security beneficiaries across this nation. Beneficiaries in your district and your state who have worked hard and have earned the right to live in dignity when they retire.

Thank you. I look forward to answering your questions and sharing more of my experience with you.