United States Senate
Committee on Finance

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Statement of Senator Chuck Grassley
Senate Committee on Finance
Hearing Barriers to Work for Individuals Receiving
Social Security Disability Benefits
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In order to receive disability benefits under current law, an individual must have a physical or mental condition that prevents him or her from working for a least a year or is expected to end in death. From the perspective of most disability beneficiaries, the thought of going back to work, after spending two or three years trying to convince the Social Security Administration that they cannot work, is a frightening prospect.

Technically, the ability to work is defined as "engaging in substantial gainful activity." Under this definition, it is possible to earn up to $900 a month (or $1,500 for the blind) and still remain eligible for Disability Insurance (DI) benefits. Under certain circumstances, it is possible to earn an unlimited amount for a limited period of time, which is called a "trial work period." Those receiving disability through the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program are subject to different limits.

Despite the fact that persons receiving disability benefits can work a limited amount without losing their benefits, very few beneficiaries choose to do so. For example, according to the latest available data, about 6 percent of SSI beneficiaries are reported as working.

It is often suggested that we need to modernize the disability program to reflect advances in medicine and technology. However, advances in medicine and technology should make it easier for those receiving disability benefits to go back to work. It should not increase the share of the population receiving disability benefits.

Improving Social Security disability programs is an important goal. However, we must be careful to ensure that the legitimate desire to encourage those receiving disability benefits to return to work does not turn into an unsustainable policy of extending disability benefits to those who are able to work well beyond the substantial gainful activity level.