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judge denied his claim.

"The judge said to me, for all I know you want the money to get alcohol and drugs," recalls Zuber. "I don't even drink!"

Zuber got representation for his case and eventually won, getting \$945 a month. He also gets health insurance, which he hadn't had in 10 years and found out that he is diabetic. He now takes medication for his agoraphobia.

In 2011, after five years of being unable to leave his parent's house, he took his first steps outside and had trouble recognizing his own street. He now visits friends and spends time with his niece and nephew. He even made it to his 20-year high school reunion.

"I can be a part of stuff that I need to be a part of," says Zuber.

Disability hearings are hard to scrutinize because they are not public, but attorneys and representatives say that judges have biases.

Portland's Mellani Calvin has worked as a non-attorney representative since 2010, helping clients navigate the SSA bureaucracy and assemble the documentation they need to make their cases. She says that it's often easier to make the case for a disabled white collar worker who has had steady health insurance and documentation of their medical problems.

"We have records to prove his case," she says. "But a homeless person hardly has any of these things, and they're ruled out really quickly."

She remembers representing two young educated women who had careers before developing chronic illnesses. She recalls the judge "falling over backwards" to award them benefits. But it was a different story when she represented a man who didn't have health insurance and was reluctant to go to the doctor because of the cost.

Richard Sly, who has worked as a disability attorney for three decades, says that judges can be hostile to poor people who smoke and have other bad habits and have worked menial jobs all their lives.

"The guy who's been an electrician all of his life, he's age 52. There's no question about his work ethic," says Sly. "He wrecked his back doing his work. They're more sympathetic to that. But I got a guy who's mentally ill, no medical care. That's going to be a harder case."

Under the law, someone qualifies for disability if there is no job in the economy they can work. Calvin says some judges will suggest jobs like egg-washer, button-sewer or potato chip-sorter for clients.

In October 2013, the Social Security Administration settled a class-action lawsuit filed against it on behalf of eight applicants who were denied benefits. The suit alleged that the applicants ran into a "brick wall of bias" from five of the eight judges staffing the administration's Queens, New York office, which had one of the highest denial rates in the country. According to the suit, the judges engaged in "bullying and unprofessional behavior," cherry-picking and manipulating evidence to support pre-ordained conclusions. Under the settlement, 4,000 denied applicants will receive new hearings.

Emilia Sicilia, director of disability benefits advocacy at the Urban Justice Center, which litigated the case, says the suit didn't make any allegations of systemic bias beyond the Queens office. However, she did say that it provided for the issuance of a policy on judge bias by the Social Security Administration.

"There has never been a lawsuit quite as large as this one because it involved more than one ALJ," says Sicilia, who adds that

The median case backlog for the 170 hearing offices spread throughout the country is 4,967. For the Seattle office, there are 5,791 cases waiting a decision. In Portland, it's 8,008 cases.

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receiving assistance. Agents took computers and will also be looking at records for any signs of malfeasance, she said.

The federal government operates two programs, Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), that provide cash benefits to individuals who are prevented from working as a result of a disability. There are 81,000 people in Oregon receiving SSI, a program for individuals who have limited resources. For SSDI, which is for people who have a work history, that number is 120,000.

Individuals who qualify for benefits but are deemed incapable of managing their own money are assigned a "payee." The payee has control over the benefit money and is entrusted with making sure that it's used to cover the basic needs of the recipient. Often the payee is a family member or close friend. Organizations such as Safety Net serve as payees for individuals who don't have the option of using friends or family.

"On April 01, 2014 Safety Net of Oregon will close our doors for good," reads a sign taped to the cracked window on the organization's office. The sign also advises clients to get in touch with the Social Security Administration to find another payee. "Thanks for the memories," the sign concludes. Another sign written on a yellow legal pad and taped to the door simply reads, "closed."

Safety Net has been Charles Vaughan's payee since last summer, which he says is "way too long." Vaughan, who has bad ankles and speaks in a heavy Alabama drawl, says that he's had trouble getting part of his \$721 monthly disability check from Safety Net to see a dentist and an optometrist, neither of which he ended up seeing. He says he just wants to get square with Safety Net and try to move back to Alabama. But in the meantime there is the pressing problem of getting a new payee.

"I don't know what to do about that," he says. Meredith said that Safety Net can still process payments for rent, medical and other needs of disability recipients but will cease those services at the beginning of April.

Street Roots was unable to reach Safety Net for comment.

Safety Net's 2012 tax forms, the most recent publicly available, states that it had \$689,987 in revenue and was running a deficit of \$2,486.

According to records on the Oregon attorney general's website, Safety Net has had five consumer complaints lodged against it. All the records state that the problems were voluntarily resolved, the consumer was pursuing their own solution or there wasn't sufficient evidence to prove that Safety Net violated the law.

biased judges and the case backlog are two separate issues.

The backlog, depending on who you ask, is partially attributable to the rise of disability law firms that base their business on volume, which has earned them the disparaging moniker of "disability mills." Critics say these firms file as many claims as possible, regardless of merit, with the expectation that enough of them will be approved to make a profit. This model involves the aggressive recruitment of clients. If you watch daytime TV, you will likely see an ad for a company promising you the benefits you deserve. Calvin says she's heard rumors that representatives will visit meal services geared toward the homeless in hopes of picking up clients.

"When you are working with that kind of volume you are not giving quality representation," says disability lawyer Cheryl Coon, who only takes 12 cases a year and estimates that some firms take on thousands of cases annually. "It's that simple."

In addition to adding to the backlog, Coon says these bulk operations also bring questionable cases before judges, which makes them more skeptical of all claims.

The most wellknown is New York City-based Binder and Binder, which didn't respond to a request for comment. In Portland, Schneider Kerr & Gibney also takes on a large volume of cases.



PHOTO BY JAKE THOMAS  
A makeshift closed sign hangs on the door to Safety Net, an agency that offered payee services to Social Security recipients in Portland. The company was closed following a federal search warrant and allegations that it was mismanaging client funds.

In Portland, Safety Net does not have the best reputation with individuals and organizations who serve recipients of federal disability benefits.

"I've had a number of clients who have had Safety Net as their representative payee, and they are universally unhappy with the response they've been getting and believe they have a hard time getting their money from Safety Net," says George Wall, an attorney who helps disabled people qualify for benefits. Wall says that when he has had a choice, he has steered clients away from using Safety Net as their payee.

Patricia Kepler, an independent living specialist at Independent Living Resources, a nonprofit organization that helps individuals with disabilities, says that she has clients being served by Safety Net and many of them are unsure how they will access their money and are panicked over the situation. Kepler says there are only five payee organizations in Oregon and the service is in high demand.

"I can tell you that a large number of our consumers are on various payee systems, and all of them have their weak moments and I've received complaints from all of them," she says. "But most of them, that I'm aware of, come from Safety Net."

Kevin Kerr, a partner at Schneider Kerr & Gibney, says that the large volume of cases his firm takes on allows it to represent people who have difficult cases that other attorneys would be reluctant to take.

"We're erring on the side of helping people," says Kerr.

This isn't the first time that disability programs have drawn national attention. Edward Berkowitz, a professor of history and public policy at George Washington University, says that there is often an uptick in disability claims following recessions, which provokes a backlash.

When Ronald Reagan was elected he and his allies passed legislation that cut the disability roles, says Berkowitz. A similar uproar, he says, occurred during the 1990s. Berkowitz says that the pendulum swings the other way when people realize the human cost. "Horror stories," says Berkowitz, of people having heart attacks or committing suicide emerged after disability roles were tightened in the 1980s, prompting Congress to backtrack.

"There's all this emphasis nationally on all these judges that approve people," says Coon. "But when you consider the human cost of disapproving a person, the more serious problem in this country is the number of people who are getting disapproved."