



State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies As Change Agents

Systems Change Information Bulletin #5:

Work Incentives & Benefits Planning and Assistance & State VR Agencies

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This is the fifth in a series of INFORMATION BULLETINS on the general topic of State VR agencies serving as systems change agents. In addition to the primary role of providing VR services to persons with disabilities (particularly those with the most significant disabilities), Congress expects that State VR agencies will perform the role of change agent within the state to enhance employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. The INFORMATION BULLETINS are located at the following website:

http://disability.law.uiowa.edu/lhpdcrrtc/vr_syschange/.

The CSAVR website includes a link to this website.

The purpose of SYSTEMS CHANGE INFORMATION BULLETIN #5 is to describe the role selected State VR agencies are playing in **providing systems change leadership in work incentives and benefits planning and assistance**.

Purposes of State VR Work Incentives and Benefits Planning Assistance Initiatives

The intent of the work incentives and benefits planning and assistance initiatives is to enhance the employment outcomes for State VR agency clients and other Social Security beneficiaries with disabilities by:

- Reducing uncertainty and fear related to potential loss of benefits if working;
- Enabling informed choice and decision-making concerning work;
- Supporting clients in implementing and tracking use of work incentives;
- Engaging community rehabilitation providers in these system change efforts to reduce fragmentation and improve coordination among providers; and
- Preventing duplication of effort by agencies and ease of access by beneficiaries.

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Specifically, this INFORMATION BULLETIN:

- Provides an overview of the types of roles performed by State VR agencies;
- Identifies State VR agencies that have assumed leadership roles in applying for and administering Work Incentives Planning and Assistance grants; and
- Includes examples describing the role selected State VR agencies are playing with respect to the provision of benefits counseling.

Overview of the Systems Change Roles Performed by State VR Agencies

State VR agencies have established goals and strategies and utilize a variety of administrative approaches to accomplish system change that will improve access to benefit planning and work incentives as a means to improve employment outcomes for persons with disabilities.¹ These approaches include:

- Establishing goals and implementing policy that all VR consumers with SSI or SSDI will be provided benefits planning services;
- Directly administering the SSA-funded Work Incentives Planning and Assistance project for all or part of state;
- Purchasing with VR funds and on a fee-for-service basis, benefit planning services or benefit information services from service providers;
- Using SSA reimbursement funds to create special caseload budgets in State VR agency field offices for VR counselors that specialize in SSI/SSDI caseloads.
- Managing all benefits planning/work incentives information projects in state that are funded from multiple sources (SSA, DOL and state MIG project) and those project staff are all VR staff to ensure ease of information exchange; and
- In a joint effort with the State MIG project or other agencies, contracting for training of staff of benefits planning/ work incentives information projects.

Leadership Role Played By State VR Agencies in Applying for and Implementing WIPA Grants.

The Social Security Administration (SSA) competitively awards cooperative agreements to establish community-based work incentives planning and assistance projects (WIPA) in every state. The purpose of these projects is to disseminate accurate information to beneficiaries with disabilities (including transition-to-work aged youth) about work incentives programs and issues related to such program, to enable them to make informed choices about working and whether or when to assign their Ticket to Work, as well as how available work incentives can

¹ The Social Security Administration has prepared a general reference source about employment-related provisions in the SSI and SSDI programs. It is commonly referred to as the "Red Book." It is written for persons with disabilities and their families, educators, advocates, rehabilitation professionals and counselors who serve individuals with disabilities. The reference for the Red Book is <http://www.socialsecurity.gov/disabilityresearch/redbook.htm>

facilitate their transition into the workforce. Eligible applicants for WIPA projects include, but are not limited to, any state or local government (e.g., State VR agency and excluding any state agency administering the Medicaid program). For an overview of WIPA grants, **see** SYSTEMS CHANGE INFORMATION BULLETIN #2. The official government website for WIPA projects is <http://www.ssa.gov/work/WIPARFA.html> or www.ssa.gov/oag/grants/ssagrant_current.htm.

The State VR agency is performing the role of “lead agency” relating to the administration of WIPA grants for the entire state in 10 states² and is administering the WIPA program in part of the state in five states.³

Examples of Roles State VR Agencies Are Playing

California

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) Work Incentive Grant (WIG) Round II was awarded to the **California** Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) in coordination with California Workforce Investment Board and a consortium of partners consisting of:

- The State Rehabilitation Council (SRC);
- The Employment Development Department (EDD);
- California’s Community College’s Chancellors Office;
- The World Institute on Disability (WID);
- San Diego University; and
- The California Workforce Association (CWA).

This grant funded the Workforce investment Resources and Accommodations Project (WRAP). The grant created: Benefits Planning Information Center (BPIC) website for the provision of accurate, state-specific, and updated benefits and resource information for persons with disabilities. The site was rolled out in March 2004. Since that time, the website (www.db101.org) has continued to expand and now includes a benefits calculator. Contact: Michelle Alford-Williams malfordw@dor.ca.gov

DOR and the Department of Mental Health jointly provide training and technical assistance on benefits planning as part of the Employment Partnership Training Series. Training on benefits planning is available to the local Mental Health cooperative programs as well as other local DOR /public mental health partnerships. Module: *Choices Matter: SSI and SSDI Tools for Recovery and Employment* Contact: Chris Cesena ccesena@dor.ca.gov.

DOR is actively involved with the California MIG project and their subcontractor, the World Institute on Disability, in organizing and providing at the local level cross-agency training on work incentives and benefits planning. Contact: Abygail Medina acmedina@dor.ca.gov.

² Connecticut, Delaware (part of the Department of Labor), Maine, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Utah, Vermont, and West Virginia (in joint effort with West Virginia University).

³ Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, North Carolina, and South Carolina.

Connecticut

The **Connecticut** Bureau of Rehabilitation Services is the lead agency for the Medicaid Infrastructure grants as well as the WIPA grants. With funds from these sources as well as VR funds, the State VR agency split-funds 7 FTE State VR staff that serve as benefits counselors. In the past, the agency retained 2 senior specialists (now 1) who provide mentoring to other counselors. The benefit counselors not only provide benefits counseling and outreach to VR clients but other persons with disabilities in the state as well. In addition, to providing one-on-one counseling, these staff serve as a resource for community groups and they work with other state and local agencies serving, among others, persons with developmental disabilities and persons experiencing mental illness. Contact person is Amy Porter (email: Amy.Porter@ct.gov).

Indiana

The **Indiana** VR agency has established the goal that every VR customer receiving SSDI or SSI will receive benefits counseling.⁴ When this goal was established in 2005, it was obvious that the capacity of the current Benefit Planning Assistance and Outreach (BPAO) programs in the state was not sufficient to meet that goal. A Pilot program in 2005 tested a means to accomplish the goal through creating a **network** of trained professionals in VR provider agencies who would work in concert with the benefit planners and state VR.

In 2006, as a result of the pilot program, and as part of its “Results-Based Funding” strategy, the state VR agency asked the provider agencies with whom the agency had a Purchase of Service agreement, to become a part of a **Benefits Information Network (BIN)**. Those provider agency staff professionals, who are designated to be part of the BIN, receive four days of training on federal and state benefits and work incentives. The provider agency is reimbursed by the Indiana state VR for specific services provided by specially trained professionals in the agencies who are part of the BIN.

The role of the Benefits Planners, now funded under the Social Security Administration’s WIPA projects, is more focused on in depth benefits analysis. The tasks of the designated staff in the provider agencies (90 participants in 2006) who are members of the BIN is the following:

- Develop a VR Customer Benefits and Employment Profile for those beneficiaries who are referred to the benefits planning agency (WIPA) by the state VR agency. (BIN staff are trained to verify benefits and work incentives available to the individual through the SSA Benefits Planning Query system)
- Provide basic information to SSI and SSDI beneficiaries who are VR customers about the impact of employment on their benefits;

⁴ The Indiana State VR agency had funded Indiana’s Center for Excellence on Disability at Indiana University for a number of years to provide work incentive training ten times a year for providers, beneficiaries, family members, VR counselors and case managers.

- Develop a preliminary analysis about possible work incentives that could be used by the VR customer and beneficiary; and
- Where necessary, detailed benefits analysis and recommendations would be developed by the staff of the WIPA- funded benefits planners in a joint effort with the state VR counselors.

The follow up role of those agencies and professionals who are part of the BIN, is to develop for each beneficiary a **Strategic Plan for Benefit Management, Support and Monitoring**. The goal is to ensure that work incentives and related supports are provided over time by the provider agencies who have worked with them to develop a vocational services plan, including after case closures.

The Indiana Institute on Disability and Community at Indiana University has been under contract with the Indiana VR and the Indiana Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG) project to provide the work incentives training during the past years. The Institute has provided significant assistance in the development of the initial Pilot Benefits Information Network initiative, and continues to provide the services needed to enroll provider agencies and their designated staff as part of the Benefits Information Network and provides, with the WIPA project, the BIN training and ongoing assistance services.

Those who are involved in the Indiana initiative see significant advantage of a Benefits Information Network being part of the VR provider agencies. That advantage is that the providers and the state VR counselors were invested in the impact of work incentives and work incentives for beneficiaries were better defined as a result of VR counselor and provider involvement. For more information contact Michael Hedden (email: Michael.hedden@fssa.in.gov).

New Mexico

The **New Mexico** Division of Vocational Rehabilitation has taken a leadership role in developing outreach and benefit planning services for SSI and SSDI beneficiaries. This has evolved and grown as the agency has and is involved in the following initiatives:

1. Provided the leadership in New Mexico state government in applying for and administering the State Partnership Initiative (SPI) project from 1998 – 2001 with primary emphasis on outreach activities.
2. Applied for and administered the original the Benefits Planning Assistance and Outreach (BPAO) project and now administers the Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) project from SSA. ,
3. Administers the Disability Navigator Project funded by the US Department of Labor and SSA that are located in One-Stop Career Centers
4. Most recently, received funds from the New Mexico Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG) project to conduct an Outreach Project for the New Mexico Medicaid Buy-In project.
5. Developed through the MIG outreach project a cadre of Peer Mentors to encourage and assist SSI and SSDI beneficiaries as they explore employment.

For more information contact Gary Beene (email: gary.beene@state.nm.us).

South Carolina

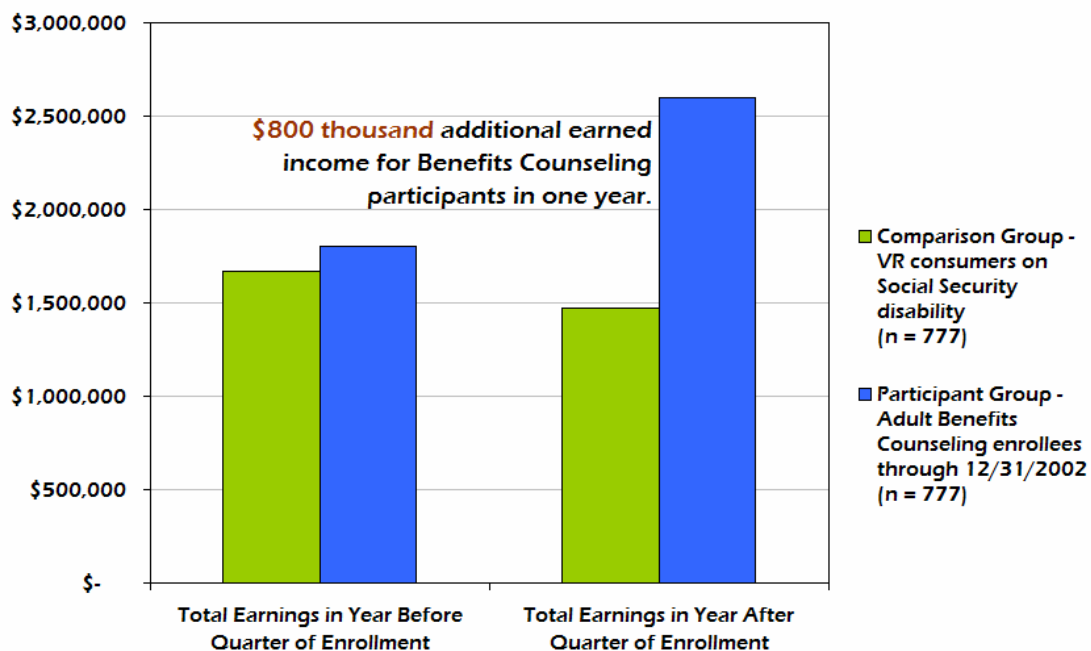
The **South Carolina** State VR agency is receiving funding for the WIPA project which service 30 out of 46 counties in the state. Agency staff are encouraged to include the community work incentive coordinators (CWICs) in the rehabilitation process. This includes meeting with the beneficiary prior to application, at the time of employment, and at the time of closure.

In addition, specific South Carolina VR agency counselors have been assigned to work with persons who receive SSI and/or SSDI (specialty caseloads). This allows those counselors to become experts in the issues that are faced by persons receiving SSI and/or SSDI. Special caseload budgets are created for each field office using SSA reimbursement funds. These budgets are used for clients receiving SSI and/or SSDI. This special budget is in addition to the field offices regular caseload budget. For more information contact, Lindsay, Shannon (email: Slindsay@SCVRD.state.sc.us).

Vermont

Since 1999 **Vermont** DVR has provided benefits counseling as part of the standard set of services provided to vocational rehabilitation consumers. The DVR benefits counselors are full time staff housed within the DVR district offices. The co-location of benefits counselors within DVR offices ensures benefits issues are incorporated into the vocational process. DVR counselors find it extremely helpful to have ready access to a benefits counselor for their consumers. It helps reduce consumer fear and anxiety about benefits and healthcare issues.

In Vermont access to benefits counseling has been associated with improved employment outcomes for VR consumers (see graph below). These findings have been published in two peer reviewed articles in the Journal of Rehabilitation and Psychiatric Services. Field staff report that VR consumers are much more willing to work at a higher level with the support of a benefits counselor. Vermont DVR funds benefits counseling through a combination of state and federal funds. Vermont DVR is the SSA Work Incentive Planning and Assistance Project for the state. For more information, contact James Smith (email: James.Smith@dail.state.vt.us).



Virginia

The **Virginia** VR agency requires results from benefits planning and work incentives assistance for a specialized group of qualified providers, and makes outcomes-based payments only if the service provided to the VR customer enables them to successfully access SSI or SSDI work incentives.

In Virginia, SSI beneficiaries must apply to local Medicaid eligibility offices to maintain their SSI-based Medicaid eligibility under Section 1619(b) when their earnings results in loss of SSI payment status. Virginia does not provide automatic eligibility for SSI beneficiaries. Therefore, assistance by trained work incentive specialists for SSI beneficiaries in applying for and obtaining continued Medicaid under Section 1619(b) is often necessary. The Virginia VR agency's outcome-based payments to qualified Work Incentive Specialist Advocates (agency-based or individual providers) rewards timely and accurate information and follow-up assistance to the beneficiary to ensure work and usage of specific work incentives. For example, earnings level that require use of Section 1619(b) for continuation of Medicaid results in an outcome-based payment to the service provider of \$200.

Outcome-based payments for assisting beneficiaries are also made for successful acquisition of the Plan for Achieving Self Support (PASS); use of Impairment Related Work Incentives (IRWE) and the Student Earned Income Exclusion (SEIE) and subsidy in the case of SSDI beneficiaries. In the case of the PASS, the VR agency pays a service provider \$200 for helping the VR customer develop and submit the plan to SSA and another \$400 once the plan is approved.

The establishment of this form of outcome-based payments for work incentive services was also partially dependent on a joint effort between the Virginia VR agency and the state MIG project in providing a special training program to qualify 29 individuals as Work Incentives Specialist Advocates. These individuals, as well as the SSA-trained Work Incentive Planning Assistance (WIPA) staff who chose to vend this service to the VR agency, are qualified to provide these services to VR customers.

For more information contact Kirsten Rowe (email: Kirsten.rowe@drs.virginia.gov).

Wisconsin

In 1995 The **Wisconsin** Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) issued a request for proposals (RFP) to establish the initial group of trained benefits counseling providers. The pioneers in this effort were a local non-profit provider of benefits counseling, SSA representatives and DVR staff specialists who worked together to develop the RFP and pilot the services in urban (Milwaukee and Madison) and rural (Menominee) areas of Wisconsin.

Following the initial service start-up efforts, Wisconsin's benefits planning and analysis provider network was greatly expanded through partnership and funding provided by DVR and the Social Security Administration (SSA) to a five-year SSA State Partnership Initiative (SPI) called "Pathways to Independence ". The SPI demonstration was operated by the Medicaid state agency and included waivers of SSI program features and benefits analysis and planning as core services in an expanded package of employment services provided at 20 locations throughout Wisconsin. The project was designed to make better use of existing

work incentives, and add new assurances of health and long term care coverage through Wisconsin's Medicaid Buy-In program. DVR contributed over \$9 million in VR Title I funds for services over the life of the project. A significant result was greatly expanded capacity within a statewide network of benefits analysis and planning service providers. You can learn more about the Wisconsin SPI project history and results at:
<http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/WIpathways/HistoryPTI.htm>.

To sustain the service as Wisconsin's SPI demonstration concluded, Wisconsin DVR adopted technical specifications for the service and converted the project funding to a fee basis. Twelve years after the initial efforts to create the new service, benefits analysis and planning is firmly established as a frequently purchased service within DVR's statewide service structure. Today, the service is purchased from over 30 trained and qualified providers. Wisconsin's fees for benefits analysis and consulting services are at:
http://dwd.wisconsin.gov/dvr/service_providers/statewide_service_fee_structure.pdf.

The technical specifications for the services are at:
http://dwd.wisconsin.gov/dvr/service_providers/tech_specs/benefits_analysis.pdf.

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