



## Social Security disability benefits: A key component in reducing Veteran homelessness

*Sponsored By:*  
Substance Abuse And Mental Health Services Administration  
U.S. Department Of Health And Human Services

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*SAMHSA*

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## Presenter Disclosure – Jen Elder

The following personal financial relationships with commercial interests relevant to this presentation existed during the past 12 months:

- No relationships to disclose

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## SOAR Technical Assistance Initiative

- SOAR – SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access & Recovery
- Focuses on people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness
- SOAR is a model for assisting individuals to apply for Social Security disability benefits
- Sponsored by the Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) in collaboration with SSA since 2005
- SOAR is active in all 50 states; no direct funding is provided to states
- SOAR TA Center helps states and communities by providing technical assistance and training

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## Changing Lives Since 2005

- 22,810 persons experiencing or at risk for homelessness have been approved on initial application
- 65% approval rate overall, in an average of 90 days in 2014
  - Top 10 SOAR states have average approval rate of 82%
- Compares to 10-15 percent for unassisted applications from people who are homeless and 29 percent for all applicants
- Appeals can take a year or more; many people give up and do not appeal

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## What is the need?

- The January 2014 point-in-time count identified almost 50,000 homeless Veterans
  - SOAR can also serve those who are at-risk for homelessness, or who recently entered permanent housing without income
- Half of Veterans experiencing homelessness have severe mental illness and over half have other health issues
- High prevalence of traumatic brain injury (TBI), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and sexual trauma among homeless Veterans contributes to difficulty in maintaining employment and housing

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## Importance of SSI/SSDI for Veterans

- SSA disability benefits can provide access to:
  - Income – Veterans can receive SSI/SSDI in conjunction with, or as an alternative to, VA disability benefits
  - Health insurance – Veterans can use the Medicaid and Medicare health benefits that comes with SSI/SSDI to supplement VA health services
- For Veterans with disabilities, SSI/SSDI can increase income & housing stability, and reduce their future risk of homelessness
- Opportunity for staff serving Veterans to help with both SSA and VA disability benefits

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## Definition of Disability

- The definition of disability and application process is different for VA and SSA benefits
  - Discharge status is not a factor in SSI/SSDI determination
  - Disabling condition does not need to be related to military service
  - Those denied for VA benefits may still be eligible for SSI/SSDI
  - Veterans can access SSA benefits while they are waiting for VA benefits
  - There is no partial disability with Social Security

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## SSA Definition of Disability

- For SSI/SSDI, the Veteran needs to show:
  - Evidence of a physical or mental health condition, which results in functional impairments that limits his/her ability to work at a substantial gainful level (quantified as \$1070/month in 2014)
  - That the disabling condition has lasted, or is expected to last, for 12 months or end in death
- Why is the applicant unable to work?

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## SSA Fast Track Programs

### 100% Permanent and Total Veterans Initiative

- Expedites SSI/SSDI applications from Veterans who have 100% P&T rating from the VA
- Does not guarantee SSI/SSDI approval

### Wounded Warriors

- Veterans who received disabling mental or physical health injuries while on active duty on or after October 1, 2001
- The injury does not need to have occurred during combat operations

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## VA Memorandum October 2013

- Applies to federal VA staff
- Staff are encouraged to participate in SOAR training and assist with SSI/SSDI applications
- May disclose VA records to SSA if Veteran signs the appropriate release (SSA-827)
- Can assist in gathering documentation, completing the SSI/SSDI application forms, and referring the Veteran to a SOAR representative, if needed
- May not serve as Authorized Representative (SSA-1696) or Representative Payee (SSA-11)
- Can be listed as a contact who knows the Veteran

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## VA and SOAR Pilot

- Launched October 2014
- Four pilot sites selected: Chicago, Long Beach, Portland, Seattle
  - Providence, RI will serve as a mentor site
- Utilize SOAR with Veterans in HUD-VASH and H-PACT
  - Some pilot sites will only implement using HUD-VASH
  - Focus on connecting Veterans with disabling conditions and zero/low income with SSA disability benefits to increase housing stability
- One year pilot with on-going technical assistance from the SOAR TA Center and VA Homeless Programs Office

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## Community Collaboration with VAMCs

- VA Medical Centers (VAMCs)
- Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) helps Veterans through SOAR using collaborations with two VA Medical Centers, as well as Veterans living in DVA's 60-bed Grant and Per Diem transitional housing program
  - Since 2011, helped 150 Veterans with a 100% approval rate in 93 days
- Detroit, Michigan - strong partnership between the VA and the Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (PATH) program
  - An outreach worker from PATH serves as the authorized representative and collaborates with a VA social worker to complete all documentation needed for the SSI/SSDI application

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## SSVF and SOAR

- Supportive Services for Veteran Families
- July 2014 survey:
  - SSVF grantees are involved in SOAR in 44 of 52 states and territories
  - 146 of the 319 individual SSVF grantees are actively using SOAR to help Veterans access SSA disability benefits
- Services include increasing access to mainstream benefits
  - Embraced SOAR as an efficient method for obtaining SSI/SSDI
  - Current notice of funding includes the expectation that grantees will use the SOAR program through community linkages or staff training
- Many grantees have amended their budgets to support a dedicated SOAR benefits specialist

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## Incorporate SOAR into Your Services

- ✓ Gather more information:
  - Issue Brief: *Connecting Veterans to Social Security Disability Benefits: A Key Component in Ending Veteran Homelessness*
  - Reach out to the SOAR TA Center with questions and to help you plan how to use SOAR
- ✓ Explore options for SOAR training with your staff
- ✓ Collaborate with community partners to refer Veterans to local SOAR initiatives

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## SOAR TA Center

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