



Utilizing Social Security disability benefits to end Veteran homelessness: Results from the field

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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





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





Changing Lives Since 2005

- 22,863 persons experiencing or at risk for homelessness have been approved on initial application
- 65% approval rate overall, in an average of 94 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





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
- If an individual is approved for SSI, treatment providers can retroactively bill Medicaid for previously uncompensated care
 - In 2014, ten states reported an average reimbursement of \$10,465/person





VA and SOAR Pilot

- Focused on connecting Veterans with disabling conditions and zero/low income with SSA disability benefits to increase housing stability
- Launched October 2014
 - Four pilot sites selected: Chicago, Long Beach, Portland, Seattle
 - Utilize SOAR with Veterans in HUD-VASH and H-PACT
- One year pilot with on-going technical assistance from the SOAR TA Center and VHA Homeless Programs Office





VA and SOAR Pilot: Lessons Learned

1. Facilitated guidance through the SOAR Online Course led to a 100% pass rate for participants on their first attempt through the course
2. Technical assistance in establishing connections between VA staff and community partners for both 1696 representation and understanding local SOAR processes facilitated strong collaborations
3. Once infrastructure was in place, participants quickly began assessing Veterans and working on applications, indicating the potential for rapid scale up





VA and SOAR Pilot: Lessons Learned

4. Chicago reports that **great collaboration amongst the different homeless program teams** (H-PACT, case managers, psychiatric nurse practitioners, primary care physicians, and neuropsychologists) is a critical part of their success
5. Those participants who were able to **dedicate staff time to SOAR** were able to successfully complete the SOAR Online Course and begin applications





VA Guidance on SOAR

VHA Homeless Programs Office is developing forthcoming guidance:
SOAR Works to End Veteran Homelessness: VA Caseworker's Guide



- Step-by-step guide on using SOAR after completing the SOAR Online Course
- Crosswalk of where to find key information for SSI/SSDI in VHA assessments
- Full of tips on how to efficiently complete applications using the SOAR model



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VA Guidance on SOAR

Five Reasons VA Caseworkers Should Take SOAR Training

1. Help end homelessness among Veterans and prevent at-risk Veterans from becoming homeless.
2. Contribute to an effort helping thousands of Veterans access the benefits they've earned.
3. Learn how to complete high-quality SSI/SSDI applications, a skill you can use throughout your work on behalf of individuals with disabilities.
4. Advance your career by learning a new skill that improves VA services on behalf of Veterans.
5. Earn 16 hours of continuing education credits (CEUs) from the National Association of Social Workers (NASW).

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SSVF and SOAR

- Notice of funding includes the expectation that grantees will use the SOAR program through community linkages or staff training
- September 2015 survey (preliminary results):
 - 91% of grantees who responded said that SOAR would be a useful tool in helping Veterans access benefits and income
 - 52% of grantees utilize the SOAR model through community referrals and providing the service in-house with both SSVF and non-SSVF staff
 - 40% of grantees have SOAR-trained staff, with an average of 2.27 trained staff per grantee
 - 14% have an SSVF funded position for a SOAR benefits specialist

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SSVF and SOAR

- September 2015 survey (preliminary results):
 - Grantees using SOAR reported that the application took an average of 27 days to complete
 - Frequently cited barriers to SOAR implementation include: funding, staff capacity, and timing
- Key Implications:
 - In some cases, rapid re-housing may be a short-term intervention, and even when it is, grantees can still successfully complete SOAR applications within the 90 days
 - There is a continued need for additional support and training to build capacity and address timing issues

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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
 - Free online training at: <http://soarworks.prainc.com/>
- ✓ Collaborate with community partners to refer Veterans to local SOAR initiatives

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