SSI/SSDI OUTREACH, ACCESS, AND RECOVERY: AN OVERVIEW

THE ISSUE
Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) are disability income benefits administered by the Social Security Administration (SSA) that also provide Medicaid and/or Medicare health insurance to eligible individuals. The application process for SSI/SSDI is complicated and difficult to navigate. Nationally, about 28 percent of individuals who apply for these benefits are approved on initial application and appeals take an average of 1 year to complete.

For people who are experiencing or at-risk of homelessness or who are returning to the community from institutions (jails, prisons, or hospitals), access to these programs can be extremely challenging. Approval on initial application for people who experiencing or at-risk of homelessness and who have no one to assist them is about 10-15 percent. For those who have a mental illness, substance use issues, or co-occurring disorders that impair cognition, the application process is even more difficult – yet accessing these benefits is often a critical first step in recovery.

A SOLUTION
The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) developed the SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) model to address this critical need. SOAR-trained case managers submit complete and quality applications that are approved quickly. The SOAR TA Center provides a three-step approach to SOAR implementation:

STRATEGIC PLANNING
Strategic planning meetings bring key state/local stakeholders (e.g., SSA and Disability Determination Services (DDS); State Mental Health Agency and Department of Corrections leadership; and community homeless, health, and behavioral health providers) together to collaborate and agree upon a SOAR process for the submission and processing of SSI/SSDI applications and develop an action plan to implement their SOAR program.

TRAINING LEADERS
Training of case managers using the SOAR Online Course. This free, web-based course includes the development of a practice case using a fictional applicant. A Leadership Academy program creates strong local leaders to support SOAR-trained case managers and coordinate local SOAR programs.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE
Individualized technical assistance for supporting action plan implementation, identifying funding opportunities for sustainability, developing quality review procedures, and assisting with tracking outcomes to document success and identify areas for improvement and expansion.

OUTCOMES
Since 2006, over 31,356 initial SOAR SSI/SSDI applications have been approved. The 2016 approval rate on initial SOAR applications averages 67 percent in 101 days. In 2016 alone, SSI/SSDI brought at least $317,641,152 into the economies of the participating localities.

For more information, e-mail us at soar@prainc.com or visit https://soarworks.prainc.com/
2016 Initial Applications
- 4,134 Approvals
- 67% Approval rate
- 101 Average days to decision

2016 Appeals
- 734 Approvals
- 60% Approval rate
- 196 Average days to decision

Cumulative Outcomes
- 31,356 Initial application approvals since 2006
- 65% Cumulative approval rate since 2006
- 36,112 Individuals gained access to SSA benefits with SOAR (initial applications & appeals)

2016 Top 10 States*
- Pennsylvania
- Tennessee
- Arkansas
- North Carolina
- South Dakota
- Washington
- Rhode Island
- Alabama
- Kansas
- Maryland

*Ranking based on cumulative approval rates. Inclusion in ranking required reporting in 2016 and at least 100 cumulative decisions.

2016 States with 1,000 Approvals*
- Florida
- Ohio
- California
- Pennsylvania
- Georgia
- Utah
- Michigan
- Tennessee
- North Carolina
- Minnesota
- New York
- Oregon

*Ranking based on approvals. Inclusion in ranking required reporting in 2016 and at least 1,000 cumulative approvals. Combined, these states have 21,411 approvals.

2016 Monetary Benefits
- $317,641,152 Brought into the economies of the participating localities
- $5,356,449 Received in back payments (1,001 individuals)
- $1,168,097 Medicaid & Medicare reimbursements (138 individuals)

2016 Employment
- 103 People working at the time of application
- $40,973 Total additional income
SOAR Best Practices for Assisting Applicants That Are Involved in the Criminal Justice System

1. **Establish SOAR Criminal Justice (CJ) leads.** Identify leadership and establish regular stakeholder meetings to address barriers and provide support to the staff that will be assisting with applications.

2. **Identify existing resources.** Identify in-house staff or community providers that are currently assisting applicants that are currently incarcerated or newly released with Supplemental Security Income/Social Security Disability Insurance (SSI/SSDI) applications.
   - What are your existing resources?
   - How are you currently assisting with benefits acquisition?
   - What is your success rate?
   - What needs to be changed?
   - Address the barriers

3. **Introduce SOAR.** Identify in-house staff and community partners that will participate in your SOAR project and get their buy-in. Engage department and facility administrators so they understand the purpose and benefits of SOAR. Establish a pilot site and create an action plan.

4. **Collaborate.** Develop a specific referral process to identify potential applicants. Negotiate a pre-release agreement with the Social Security Administration (SSA) and Disability Determination Services (DDS) so that expectations and commitments are clear (c.f., *Best Practices for Collaborating with SSA and DDS on SSI Outreach for People Experiencing Homelessness*). Establish a process to obtain medical records from providers that treat people who are currently incarcerated. Identify staff who can be fully or partially dedicated to assisting with benefits applications.

5. **Train and support staff that assist SSI/SSDI applicants.** Have staff complete SOAR training through the SOAR Online Course. Identify mentors who can assist new trainees with their first few applications. Inform trainees of the expectations for participation in SOAR for your agency or facility. Establish mechanisms for on-going communication and support, i.e. refresher trainings, conference calls, newsletters, monthly meetings of trainees, SSA and DDS.

6. **Quality review.** Ensure that applications submitted to SSA are complete and high quality. Use the SOAR Quality Review Checklist for SSI/SSDI or establish your own quality review procedures (e.g. mentoring, supervisory reviews, reviewing Medical Summary Reports). Review the *Best Practices for Assisting SSI/SSDI Applicants Experiencing Homelessness* to assess fidelity to the SOAR model. Hold regular steering committee meetings to identify and resolve any challenges.

7. **Track and report outcomes.** Use the SOAR Online Application Tracking (OAT) program to collect and report outcomes. It is free, web-based ([https://soartrack.prainc.com/](https://soartrack.prainc.com/)), and easy to use.

8. **Fund and sustain.** Use your outcomes to expand or sustain your SOAR project. Analyze data and report the cost savings associated with SOAR. Share success stories; give presentations to influential leaders and potential funders. High reimbursement and recoupment totals can be used to attract additional resources and supplemental funding.
SOAR Leadership Academy

What is a SOAR Leadership Academy?
The SOAR Leadership Academy is a three-day training program presented by the SAMHSA SOAR Technical Assistance (TA) Center designed to prepare individuals to serve as Local Leads within their communities, guide the SOAR initiative, and support individuals who complete the SOAR Online Course.

Topics Covered:
- Creating & Leading a Local Steering Committee
- Facilitating Effective Meetings
- Using the Online Application Tracking (OAT) system
- Funding & Sustaining SOAR in Your Community
- Conducting a one-day SOAR Fundamentals Training
- Supporting Quality SOAR Applications in Your Community
- Working with Special Populations and Special Considerations – Veterans, Children, Justice Involved Persons, American Indians and Alaska Natives, and Appeals
- Creating a Local Action Plan

Expectations of Leadership Academy Registrants
- Receive recommendation from the State Team Lead
- Successfully complete the SOAR Online Course (http://soarworks.prainc.com) prior to attending
- Attend all three days of the program from 8:30 AM – 4:30 PM

Roles & Responsibilities of Local Leads Post-Leadership Academy
- Conduct periodic one-day SOAR Fundamentals trainings for those who have completed the SOAR Online Course to refresh SOAR core elements and train on state-specific SOAR processes
- Follow-up with SOAR trainees in regular meetings to discuss issues and progress on completing applications
- Collaborate with community providers and local SSA and DDS contacts to plan, implement and support local SOAR initiatives
- Work closely with the State Team Lead and SOAR TA Center to carry out the SOAR implementation plan in your region and to track and report outcomes

Successful SOAR Local Leads
- Have experience completing SSI/SSDI applications using the SOAR model (recommended but not required)
- Are invested in SOAR and the success of SOAR within their community
- Have the time and ability to work with multiple agencies and/or the Continuum of Care within their community
- Have the capacity to lead a SOAR steering community and follow-up with trainees regarding outcomes
- Will maintain and update their community’s SOAR action plan
- Will be able to conduct one-day SOAR Fundamentals trainings for individuals who successfully complete the SOAR Online Course
SOAR Online Course
Overview and Objectives

Overview
The SOAR (SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access and Recovery) Online Course trains case managers to assist individuals who are experiencing homelessness to apply for the Social Security Administration (SSA) disability programs: Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). The techniques taught in this online course can improve the quality and completeness of any application for SSI/SSDI, however, the label “SOAR” should only be used on SSI/SSDI applications for persons who are homeless or at risk for homelessness.

The SOAR Online Course consists of seven classes, each of which has a series of articles, short quizzes, and a practice case. This practice case provides an opportunity for case managers to apply what they have learned by completing an SSI/SSDI application packet for a fictitious applicant using SOAR techniques. Video interviews, medical records, and progress notes provide the information needed to complete SSA forms and write a Medical Summary Report (MSR) for the applicant. The complete application packet is submitted to the SOAR Technical Assistance (TA) Center for review. Upon approval, the participant will receive a certificate of completion and 20 continuing education (CE) contact hours from the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). There is no charge for this course.

We estimate that it will take about 20 hours to complete the course and participants can work at their own pace, starting and stopping as they wish. However, we encourage students to complete the course within 30 days to retain the information learned and get connected sooner to local SOAR initiatives.

Learning Objectives

Class 1: The Need for SOAR
The Need for SOAR provides an introduction to SOAR, its values, and the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders, especially case managers.
- Why SOAR is an important tool for case managers to use when assisting people who are experiencing or at-risk of homelessness and who have a mental illness, co-occurring substance use disorder or other disability apply for SSA disability benefits
- What values inform the SOAR process
- Important community organizations and stakeholders necessary for a successful SOAR effort and the roles they play
- An overview of SSA’s disability benefit programs, SSI and SSDI
- Key steps in the disability application process

Class 2: Initiating the Application
Initiating the Application describes strategies to engage an applicant in the application process. It also stresses two key components in the SOAR program – becoming the applicant’s representative and collecting medical evidence.
- Effective strategies for case managers to use in engaging the applicant they are assisting
- Importance of becoming the applicant’s representative
- SOAR strategies for collecting medical evidence
Class 3: Exploring Basic Eligibility
The Social Security Administration has two types of eligibility requirements – medical and non-medical. Exploring Basic Eligibility examines the non-medical requirements, which include resources and living arrangements.

- What constitutes “non-medical” eligibility
- Income and resources limits for SSI eligibility
- How to complete the SSI and SSDI application forms
- Different types of living arrangements and their impact on potential benefits

Class 4: Medical Information
Medical Information focuses on the medical eligibility requirements. It describes what information is necessary and the steps in the disability determination process.

- What medical documentation is necessary
- How to work with SSA’s Listings of Impairments
- Steps in the disability determination process
- Strategies for gathering information about substance use
- What Consultative Exams are and when they are required
- How to complete the Adult Disability Report

Class 5: The Link to Functioning
Medical records alone are frequently not adequate for the disability determination process. It is important to make the link between the diagnosis and the applicant’s ability to function in a work setting. SOAR documents this link in the Medical Summary Report.

- Importance of linking the illness or condition to the applicant’s ability to function in four main areas
- How to effectively write about functioning
- Elements of the Medical Summary Report

Class 6: Completing the Application Packet
There are several documents that need to be included in a complete SOAR application packet that is submitted to SSA. There is also necessary follow-up post approval. Completing the Application Packet covers these topics, and also includes a discussion of appeals in the event of a denial.

- Elements of a complete SOAR application packet
- Next steps following an approval
- SSA’s appeals process

Class 7: Supporting Recovery
Getting disability benefits is an initial step on the road to recovery. Supporting Recovery reviews other programs that can assist an applicant after s/he receives disability benefits.

- Strategies for accessing housing once benefits have been received
- Medicare Savings Programs to help with health care costs
- Work incentives for applicants wishing to return to work
The SAMHSA SOAR (SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access and Recovery) Technical Assistance Center is sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

SOAR is operated by Policy Research Associates
345 Delaware Avenue
Delmar, New York 12054
p. 518-439-7415
f. 518-439-7612
soar@prainc.com

http://soarworks.prainc.com
How Can **OAT** Help Your Agency, Community, or State?

**Online Application Tracking...**
- Keeps track of SOAR-assisted SSI/SSDI applications
- Records decisions on applications, including appeals
- Summarizes outcomes in reports that can be used for sustainability efforts
- Is located on a secure server with no personally identifiable information
- Takes 5 minutes or less to enter data on each application
- Incurs no cost to you or your agency

**Why Track Outcomes?**
- Expand your SOAR initiative
- Persuade potential partners to join your SOAR effort by showing your achievements
- Monitor case workers’ approval rates and use of SOAR core components to better target technical assistance and refresher training
- Sustain local, state, and federal SOAR efforts — outcomes are essential!

**Advantages**

**For case workers...**
- Track your SOAR applications online anytime
- Have all your application outcomes in one place

**For agency leads, supervisors...**
- Track performance by individual or all case workers
- Have easy access to reports for quality review purposes

**For state and local leads...**
- Access reports on application outcomes anytime
- Prepare agency reports by date, agency, or locality
- Generate separate reports for initial applications and appeals

**What people are saying about OAT...**

*This format is easy to use.*
—Case worker from NJ

*This is really exciting to see all my data in the system.*
—Case worker from FL

*I am glad that it will be so easy! Looking forward to getting more and more providers on board!*  
—State lead

**Enroll in OAT**
- Register at the OAT home page [https://soartrack.prainc.com](https://soartrack.prainc.com)
- View brief tutorials and user guides
- Send questions to soaroat@prainc.com

**Overview**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial SOAR</th>
<th>Reconsider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approved</td>
<td>Denied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approved</td>
<td>Denied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Approvals | 29 | 7 |
| Denials   | 4  | 4 |
| Total Decisions | 33 | 11 |
| Approval Rate (%) | 88% | 64% |
| Avg Days to Decision | 23 | 5 |

**Approved For**

| SSI Only | 2 (29%) |
| SSDI Only | 0 (0%) |
| Both | 1 (14%) |
| Not Completed | 4 (57%) |

**DEMOGRAPHICS (OF ALL DECISIONS)**

| Male | 23 | 7 |
| Female | 10 | 4 |
| Military Service | 9 | 2 |
| Average Age | 34 | 37 |

**OTHER BENEFITS (OF ALL DECISIONS)**

| TANF | 9 | 3 |
| State/Local/Public assistance | 7 | 5 |
| Medicaid | 0 | 0 |
| Don’t Know | 2 | 0 |
| No Public Assistance | 11 | 2 |