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 OUTCOMES

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

84% Approval rate

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
Best Practices for Implementing State and Local SSI/SSDI Outreach Initiatives for People Experiencing Homelessness

1. **Establish leads.** Identify state and local leadership and establish a steering committee.

2. **Identify existing resources.** Identify programs/staff that are currently assisting individuals experiencing or at-risk of homelessness 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?

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

4. **Collaborate.** Negotiate a specific referral process 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 homeless in the community. Identify staff who can be fully or partially dedicated to assisting with benefits applications. Realign or combine existing resources, identify new funds. Is there an opportunity to benefit from retroactive recovery of uncompensated care?

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 in your state and any state-specific processes. 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’s 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](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 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
## Best Practices for Assisting SSI/SSDI Applicants Experiencing Homelessness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical Component</th>
<th>Requirements</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Dedicated Staff** | ▪ Provide sufficient staff time to do outreach and engagement and to assist applicants with SSI/SSDI applications  
▪ Arrange for training using the SOAR Online Course  
▪ Provide ongoing training and support, locally based, for case managers assisting applicants | ▪ Staff should have experience interviewing for and documenting functional information for writing a medical summary report  
▪ Staff should be skilled in engagement and rapport building |
| **Maintain Contact** | ▪ Ability and flexibility to hold meetings on an outreach basis  
▪ Attention to detail, follow-through and ongoing effort to maintain contact  
▪ Clarity on SSI/SSDI process to maintain communication with SSA and DDS | ▪ Help facilitate access to housing and other essential services when available  
▪ Provide immediate response to access services so applicants feel heard and understood and contact is maintained |
| **Authorized Representative** | ▪ Use SSA-1696 Appointment of Representative form | ▪ Provide assistance to applicants who appoint case manager as their representative; offer others information on how to apply for SSI on their own |
| **Medical Records and Medical Summary Report** | ▪ Use SSA and agency release for each treatment source  
▪ Use cover letter specifying that information will be re-released to SSA  
▪ Staff write medical summary report that is co-signed by treating physician or psychologist | ▪ Work proactively with medical records directors  
▪ Ensure medical providers are aware of what needs to be sent  
▪ Inform them of information needs  
▪ Offer to copy records  
▪ Ensure agency release is HIPAA compliant |
| **Assessments** | ▪ If needed, provide or arrange for physicians or psychologist to conduct assessments, including diagnosis and functioning  
▪ Provide assessment on an outreach basis, as needed  
▪ Have physician or psychologist co-sign medical summary report | ▪ Arrange for training of physician or psychologist regarding information needed by DDS  
▪ Explain the importance and purpose of the medical summary report to physicians and psychologists  
▪ NOTE: If an assessment is needed, but not available before an application is submitted, SSA is likely to order a Consultative Exam (CE) |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical Component</th>
<th>Requirements</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality Review*</td>
<td>▪ Expert uses protocol to review application for accuracy, completeness and clarity</td>
<td>▪ Expert receives special training regarding review techniques</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Electronic Submission | ▪ Complete all available SSA forms online  
▪ Submit medical records electronically through the ERE or DDS fax cover sheet process | ▪ Provide training on the use of SSA’s electronic process  
▪ Sign up for Electronic Records Express with DDS |
| SSA/DDS Collaboration | Request that SSA and DDS:  
▪ Flag cases from assisting agencies  
▪ Expedite the review  
▪ Assign claims representatives and disability examiners who specialize in applications from individuals experiencing homelessness  
▪ Communicate directly with assisting agencies about information needs for particular applications  
▪ Contact assisting agency if CE needed  
▪ Review and implement the SOAR Process adapted for use in the State | ▪ Keep in ongoing contact with appropriate staff at SSA and DDS  
▪ Respond quickly to requests for additional information |
| Avoid Consultative Examinations (CEs) | ▪ Provide or arrange for physicians and psychologists (outdoors, if needed) to conduct needed evaluations prior to submitting documentation to DDS so that CEs are not needed (see # 5 above)  
▪ Ensure collection of all medical and functional information relevant to the claim  
If CE is required:  
▪ Request that applicant’s treating physician be allowed to conduct exam  
▪ Make sure applicant gets to the exam; accompany applicant, if possible | ▪ Provide and train the physician or psychologist who will conduct the thorough evaluation SSA needs to determine disability  
▪ Prepare for needed diagnostic evaluations by having other clinical staff and case managers assist in collection of historical information  
▪ Make least use of most expensive clinicians  
▪ NOTE: Requiring a CE means that SSA does not have enough medical documentation to make a decision. CEs increase the length of time needed for SSA to make a decision. |
| Organizational Representative Payee | ▪ Ensure access to appropriate representative payee services are available | ▪ Develop representative payee services in existing or future SSI/SSDI initiative programs  
▪ Assist beneficiary to become their own payee as appropriate |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical Component</th>
<th>Requirements</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Employment         | ▪ Incorporate strategies for encouraging consideration of and participation in employment at earliest possible time  
▪ Ensure case managers are aware of work incentives under SSI and SSDI using SOAR online training curriculum | ▪ Invite Department of Labor and vocational service providers to be part of the SOAR initiative  
▪ Resources available in every state can be accessed at: [http://www.chooseworkttw.net/resourc e/jsp/searchByState.jsp](http://www.chooseworkttw.net/resource/jsp/searchByState.jsp)  
▪ Connect with SSA Work Incentive Coordinators |
| Outcome Tracking   | Track key data elements:  
▪ Date initial application submitted  
▪ Date initial decision rendered  
▪ Outcome of initial decision  
▪ Housing status at time of application  
▪ Use of SOAR Critical Components | ▪ Use the SAMHSA’s free Online Application Tracking (OAT) program for SOAR  
▪ Use locally established process for tracking applications (HMIS, Excel, Access)  
▪ Track additional data elements including Medicaid reimbursement and other cost savings/cost recovery |
| Funding and Sustainability | ▪ Establish funding for ongoing program implementation | ▪ Use outcome data to make the case for sustaining or expanding SSI/SSDI application assistance  
▪ Work with hospitals, State Medicaid and General Assistance offices to recoup money spent on uncompensated care and general assistance benefits; be clear that as they benefit, their assistance in continuing or expanding SSI outreach is needed  
▪ Provide eligibility assistance to people at risk for homelessness in jails and prisons; link to re-entry  
▪ Explore collaborations with employment, housing, and veterans programs |

*Analysis of OAT conducted in 2013 found using these components significantly improved the likelihood of an application being approved (p<.001). Using them in combination with one another further increased the likelihood of application approval.*
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
Ways of establishing the protective filing date and starting the application process

**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!

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

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

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!

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

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