

Past, Present and Future of Benefits Advocacy in Los Angeles County

**Presented by: LA Department of Health
Services, Department of Military and
Veterans Affairs, Legal Aid Foundation Los
Angeles, & Los Angeles County Sheriff's
Department**

POPULATION

Homeless persons experience a disproportionate high rate of disability; 36.8% of sheltered adults have a disability, compared to 24.6% of persons living in poverty and 15.3% of adults nationwide.

Nationally, about 37% of SSI or SSDI applications are initially approved. However, for homeless persons without guidance during the application process, the acceptance rate is roughly 10–15%.

OVERVIEW

- **Review the history of benefits advocacy in Los Angeles County**
- **Effective best practices for homeless, disabled individuals**
- **Review the recently approved Homeless Initiatives regarding benefits acquisition for homeless**

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **Identify best practices in benefits advocacy for homeless disabled individuals**
- **Identify the need for benefits advocacy as a part of a larger strategy to end homelessness.**

INTRODUCTIONS

- **Leepi Shimkhada (Moderator)**
- **Elena Fiallo (Dept. of Health Services)**
- **Rose Liu (Dept. of Health Services)**
- **Stephanie Stone (Dept. of Military & Veterans Affairs)**
- **Nicole Perez (Legal Aid Foundation Los Angeles)**
- **Sgt. Mike Rich (LA County Sheriff's Dept)**

PURPOSE OF BENEFITS ADVOCACY

ADVANTAGES

- Severely disabled homeless individuals can increase their income through federal disability benefits & entitlements.
- An increase to their income can help pay for their housing in the future.
- Greater access to a variety of housing options.

PAST BENEFITS ADVOCACY INITIATIVES

HISTORY OF BENEFITS ADVOCACY IN LA COUNTY

- **SSI/SSDI, Outreach, Access and Recovery (SOAR)**
 - SOAR is a national program designed to increase access to SSI/SSDI for eligible adults* who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness** and have a mental illness, medical impairment, and/or a co-occurring substance use disorder.
- **How does SOAR Work?**
 - Case managers receive SOAR Training to learn how to complete and submit a thorough SSI/SSDI application packet
 - A state or community establishes a SOAR Process for the submission and processing of SSI/SSDI applications
 - State & Local SOAR Team Leaders support SOAR-trained case managers and keep stakeholders engaged
 - The SOAR TA Center provides the Technical Assistance needed to keep the SOAR effort moving forward

HISTORY OF BENEFITS ADVOCACY IN LA COUNTY

- Homeless Outreach Projects and Evaluation (HOPE)
 - Congress appropriated funds for the Social Security Administration (SSA) to conduct outreach and application assistance to people who were homeless and to other under-served populations. SSA used these funds to develop and implement the Homeless Outreach Projects and Evaluation (HOPE) demonstration initiative in 2003.
 - The Project HOPE demonstration provided funding for 41 HOPE programs across the nation that conduct outreach to people who are chronically homeless and have a disability.
 - HOPE programs assisted eligible individuals with filing SSA disability benefit applications and accessing mainstream treatment and services (e.g., housing, mental health care). SSA provided information about the disability application process and ongoing technical assistance to HOPE programs.

HISTORY OF BENEFITS ADVOCACY IN LA COUNTY

- Benefits Entitlement Services Team (BEST)
 - Demonstration project started in 2009 to increase the number of homeless individuals receiving SSDI/SSI benefits.
 - The project's collaborative partners include the Social Security Administration (SSA), the State Disability Determination Services Division (DDSD) and the staff of the DHS Homeless Services Unit. Working directly with the SSA and the DDSD has maximized expediency in processing SSDI/SSI applications and increased approval rates.

Goal of BEST Project

- To reduce barriers and achieve positive outcomes for homeless individuals applying for SSDI/SSI throughout Los Angeles County.
- Make connections with hospitals and clinics and other homeless services agencies to receive referrals and provide training to create capacity in the region.

Funded By

- **Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors Homeless Prevention Initiative (HPI) through the Department of Health Services (DHS).**
- **Launched December 1, 2009.**

Partnership

- **John Wesley Community Health (JWCH Institute)**
- **Social Security Administration (SSA)**
- **Disability Determination Service (DDS)**
- **DHS Homeless Services Unit staff**

Multidisciplinary Team

- Case managers
- Outreach worker
- Psychiatrists
- Primary care physicians
- Social Security Administration analysts and reps
- Disability Determination Services analysts and reps
- DHS Homeless Services Unit staff

Services Provided

- Provide representation at no cost. It is the mission of the program to reduce barriers and increase access to SSDI/SSI for homeless individuals without taking any fee for service or a percentage of the back pay or current check.
- Provide case management/consultation services to homeless individuals who are in need of SSI/SSDI benefits.
- Liaison with direct service providers to collect needed medical and/or psychiatric records, advise on how to fill out DDS questionnaires.

Services Provided

- **Collect all medical evidence prior to submission of the SSI/SSDI application.**
- **Provide medical and/or psychiatric evaluation(s) prior to applying for SSI/SSDI benefits.**
- **Complete comprehensive SSI/SSDI application**
- **Provide primary and behavioral health care linkage to all participants.**
- **Linkages and referrals to housing and other needed supportive services.**

Outcomes

- **90% - 96% Approval Rate**
- **Total Enrolled Since December 1, 2009 = 1600**
- **Average length of time from online filing date to SSA initial decision date = 4 months**
- **Average length of time from BEST enrollment date to SSA initial decision date = 6 months**

APPROVED STRATEGIES TO COMBAT HOMELESSNESS

Approved Strategies to Combat Homelessness

- August 17, 2015 the LA County of Board of Supervisors approved the Homeless Initiative to combat the homeless crisis that pervades our communities
- Recommended Strategies
 - Strategy A: Prevent Homelessness
 - Strategy B: Subsidize Housing
 - Strategy C: Increase Income
 - Strategy D: Provide Case Management and Services
 - Strategy E: Create a Coordinated System

**C4: ESTABLISH A COUNTYWIDE SSI
ADVOCACY PROGRAM FOR PEOPLE
EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS OR AT
RISK FOR HOMELESSNESS**

STRATEGY C4

- **Establish a Countywide SSI Advocacy Program for people experiencing homelessness or at risk of Homelessness**
 - **Direct the Department of Health Services to collaborate with the Department of Public Social Services and other relevant County Departments to establish a Countywide Supplemental Security Income Advocacy Program**
 - **The recommended countywide SSI Advocacy Program would provide assistance to eligible homeless individuals and those at risk for homelessness (including disabled GR participants) in applying for and obtaining SSI or other related benefits.**
 - **\$6.8 million in ongoing annual DPSS funding from the General Relief SSI and Medi-Cal Advocacy Program which would be replaced by this recommended program.**

POPULATION TARGETED

- Disabled homeless individuals, including older adults, and those at risk of homelessness in need of applying for and obtaining SSI, SSDI or CAPI benefits.

C4 COMPONENTS

- Receiving referrals from various points of entry
- Co-location at DPSS 14 General Relief offices
- Conducting and/or leveraging outreach and engagement activities to identify eligible homeless individuals
- Providing assessment and screening to ensure candidates meet both non medical and medical requirements for SSI/SSDI or CAPI
- Developing and filing high quality benefit application
- Providing assistance for those at risk of losing or requiring recertification on their SSI benefits

**C5: ESTABLISH A COUNTYWIDE
VETERANS BENEFITS ADVOCACY
PROGRAM FOR VETERANS
EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS OR AT
RISK OF HOMELESSNESS**

STRATEGY C5

- **Establish a Countywide Veterans Benefits Advocacy Program for Veterans Experiencing Homelessness or At Risk of Homelessness**
 - **Direct the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs to contract for one or more Homeless Veterans Benefits Specialists Resource Teams.**
 - **\$1.2 million in Homeless Prevention Initiative funds out of the \$5 million approved for implementation of the Homes for Heroes report.**

POPULATION TARGETED

- Veterans who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, and who have yet to connect with benefits that would assist in their financial sustainability.

C5 COMPONENTS

- **Conduct and/or leverage outreach and engagement activities to identify eligible veterans**
- **Receive referrals from community organizations and County departments such as DPSS, DMH, DHS and others, of veterans who need assistance**
- **Coordinate with existing homeless entry points and housing program to arrange subsidized housing or VASH Vouchers for those individuals enrolling in the program**

C5 COMPONENTS (CONT.)

- **Identify housing sustainability opportunities for veterans at risk of or are homeless**
 - **VA Benefits**
 - **Legal services**
 - **Claim appeals**
 - **Discharge upgrades**
 - **Educational, training or employment referrals**
- **Develop and file high qualify benefits application, including new and original, reopened and increased rating claims**

C6: TARGETED SSI ADVOCACY FOR INMATES

STRATEGY C6

- **Targeted SSI Advocacy for Inmates**
 - **Direct the Sheriff's Department and the Department of Health Services, in collaboration with the Department of Mental Health, to develop an Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Advocacy Program for Inmates.**
 - **Assist disabled, incarcerated individuals in completing and submitting their SSI application prior to discharge or in securing reinstatement of their SSI benefits.**
 - **\$1 Million one time funds from AB 109.**

POPULATION TARGETED

- Homeless individual scheduled for release from an LA County jail who have been assessed to have a severe mental or physical disability. (Single adults, older adults, veterans and chronically homeless)

C6 COMPONENTS

▪ Pre Release

- Facility gathers release eligible inmates.
- Benefits eligibility specialists are assigned to screen for SSI and SSDI Eligibility
- Inmates who are potentially eligible for SSI or SSDI will be invited to participate in the advocacy program

▪ Post Release

- Upon discharge individual to complete the SSI/SSDI application process.
- Once a formerly incarcerated individual begins receiving SSI or SSDI, the individual will be transitioning to appropriate permanent housing.

Any questions?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!