

## **ACCES-VR: Benefits Advisement Services**

### **Background**

ACCES-VR participants are often involved or could benefit from a range of benefit programs like Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), Medicaid, and Medicare. Other benefits received by participants or available to them include: private insurance coverage, financial planning, food stamps, PASS plans, public assistance benefits (i.e., Family Assistance or Safety Net benefits), student loans, other financial aid benefits (e.g., TAP and PELL grants), and federal and state tax provisions which reduce tax liability. Benefits advisement services can be a critical employment support for individuals with disabilities who receive public entitlements. Understanding how benefits are impacted by earnings is an important step in making an informed decision about work.

ACCES-VR purchases Benefits Advisement Services under our CRS contract. It typically includes more than the work incentives planning provided by WIPAs. We have found that WIPA services are more prevalent in down state NY and more likely to be purchased from CRS providers in Western NY.

Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA)- projects are authorized by Social Security to provide free benefits counseling to Social Security disability recipients and are authorized to serve all SSA recipients with disabilities, including transition-to-work aged youth.

Each WIPA is staffed with Community Work Incentive Coordinators (CWIC). Their primary objective is to actively promote employment outcomes.

While they will provide services to recipients of SSI/SSDI who request it, their priority is to work with individuals who are employed or ready for employment.

The Social Security Administration awarded 95 cooperative agreements nationwide in August 2013 to provide Work Incentive Planning and Assistance (WIPA) programs to ensure their beneficiaries have access to the information they need. There are seven WIPA projects in NYS:

Abilities Inc.	Albertson, NY
Research Foundation for Mental Hygiene	Brooklyn, NY
Goodwill of Greater NY & Northern NJ, Inc. (I)	Brooklyn, NY
Goodwill of Greater NY & Northern NJ, Inc. (II)	Brooklyn, NY
Neighborhood Legal Services	Buffalo, NY

Goodwill of Greater NY & Northern NJ, Inc. (III)	Long Island City, NY
Research Foundation for Mental Hygiene	New York, NY
Independent Living, Inc.	Newburgh, NY
City University of NY Research Foundation (CUNY)	NY
Resource Center for Independent Living	Utica, NY

To locate a WIPA closest to you, enter a zip code at the following site to search <http://choosework.net/resource/jsp/searchByState.jsp>

For information about Ticket to Work, please refer to the attached Fact Sheet.

**Base Line Data** (From UCS Utilization 01/01/2009- 12/31/2013)

Utilization of Benefits Advisement Services

Increase from an average of .5% of total consumers to 1.1% in 2013 calendar year  
Largest % of consumers (6.7%) were referred during post-employment

Wages and Hours

All consumers closed Status 26

Wages: \$10.96  
Hours: 6,437 (56.7%) work 30 hours or more

Individuals who received benefits advisement services

Wages: \$10.85  
Hours: 52 (47.3%) work 30 hours or more

ACCES-VR is currently in the process of developing a plan to increase utilization of Benefits Advisement Services.

**Objectives**

- Enhance participant informed choice;
- Increase the number of employment outcomes;
- Improve the quality of employment outcomes;
  - Wages
  - Hours
- Increase SSA/VR Reimbursements for SSI/SSDI Recipients

**Strategies**

- SSI/SSDI Recipients

- Discuss benefits advisement and refer all interested SSI/SSDI recipients for Benefits Advisement;
  - Individual's choice to participate
- Start Benefit Advisement Services earlier, eg. Status 10;
- Increase capacity of CRS contracts (but not to exceed providers' stated capacity);
- WIPAs to provide advisement once a participant is placed in employment;
- Provide staff training;
- Communicate to ILCs;
- Track utilization data monthly;
- Review vendor performance; i.e. participant outcomes;
- Provide tailor benefit advisement services to youth