

# State Agency Promising Practice

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TOPIC:  
Funding and  
Service Contracting

## Benefits Counseling Service from the Alabama Department of Mental Health Encourages Community Employment

by Jennifer Bose

### Background

In 2016, Alabama's Department of Mental Health (ADMH)/Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) contracted with the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services (ADRS) to train Community Partner Work Incentive counselors to provide benefits counseling to individuals served by ADMH who were moving from facility-based day services into competitive integrated employment. State agency staff were aware that many individuals and their families chose not to pursue integrated employment for fear of losing Medicaid, cash benefits, and other income support programs. This is the first of two stories describing Alabama's efforts to expand benefits counseling services.

In late 2020, to increase the timeliness and availability of benefits counseling, the employment director at the DDD led an initiative to provide benefits counseling as a service through ADMH. Alabama added work incentives counseling as a formal Medicaid Waiver service to Alabama's new Community Waiver program to support this initiative. Additionally, ADMH entered into a cooperative agreement with the Social Security Administration to provide benefits counseling under the Work Incentives and Planning Assistance program. The ADMH benefits counseling program is open to any person receiving services under each of Alabama's seven Medicaid Waivers as well as any person in the community who receives a Social Security disability benefit.

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### Implementation

Benefits counseling services are free to those who qualify. To be eligible for benefits counseling services, an individual must be at least 14 years old (but not yet retirement age) and already receiving or approved to receive Social Security benefits based on disability. Priority is given to those who are:

- » receiving Medicaid Waivers services
- » already working
- » considering a job-offer
- » interviewing for a job within the last 30 days or the next 2 weeks
- » veterans
- » transition-age youth between the ages of 14-25

Alabama promotes the benefits counseling service to waiver participants to ensure that all who can benefit from the service are aware of this program. The ADMH markets services through presentations to high schools, colleges, Project Search sites, and other provider agencies. Other service recipients are referred by the Social Security Ticket to Work Help Line or through ADMH's Mental Health and Substance Abuse Division (ADMH/MH/SA). One activity during the marketing events is a game



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that involves handing out pretend money to show people how they can have more income through working as opposed to just receiving Social Security benefits. The game is designed to help people understand that any reduction or loss in Social Security cash benefits is made up for by the earnings they will make from their job, and that in most cases, they can keep their Medicaid coverage.

## Impact

Extensive marketing of the benefits counseling service has been an important part of its success. One impact of the marketing is that it has helped to counteract misinformation about the effects of employment earnings on Medicaid and Social Security cash benefits for people and their families. One benefits counselor explained:

*“We’ve realized the more we do this that it’s not so much the individual but it’s more their parents who are holding back... it’s the parents who are more worried and thoughtful about how working will affect their benefits.”*

Another benefits counselor shared:

*“Bad information is a disservice to individuals who want to work. Our goal is to show them that working can positively impact their life.”*

Another impact is that individuals and families who have had positive experiences with the service let others in their community know about the opportunity to receive

benefits counseling. Benefits counselors noted that when peers share information with each other, there is an increase in referrals from that community.

## Suggestions for Replication

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) need accurate information. While each waiver program implements the service a little differently, the goal is the same: to provide accurate information so that each person can make an informed decision about work.

Families of people with IDD also need education about the benefits of work. Parents and guardians can have a significant impact on the employment decisions of people with IDD. Families can help make benefits planning services successful by helping ensure that people with IDD have access to information about benefits planning.

Benefits planning services should be tailored to the individual. Benefits planning should be available prior to pursuing employment, while contemplating a job offer or promotion, and when changing career paths.

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