

Partnership Plus

*Creating Opportunities
for Vocational Rehabilitation
and Employment Networks
to Work Together*



Background

Under the VR Cost Reimbursement (CR) program which began in 1981, SSA reimburses State VR agencies for money spent to assist Social Security beneficiaries with disabilities (SSI and SSDI beneficiaries) in entering or re-entering the workforce and maintaining continuous employment over 9 months within a 12 month period with “net” earnings at or above the Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA) level (\$940 for non-blind and \$1,570 for blind beneficiaries in 2008). Regardless of whether a beneficiary is eligible for a Ticket to Work or not, the CR program applies to all SSI and SSDI beneficiaries that VR agencies serve.

Only State VR agencies are eligible to participate in the CR program, which is a separate program from the Ticket to Work (TTW) program. The criteria for claiming CR are set by SSA under 20 CFR Part 404.2101 through 404.2127 for Title II beneficiaries and 20 CFR Part 416.2201 through 416.2227 for Title XVI beneficiaries, not through the Ticket regulations (20 CFR Part 411). The Rehabilitation Act, its governing regulations, and the Department of Education’s General Administrative Requirements (EDGAR) address the CR program with regard to payments from SSA and how such “program income” can be utilized.

The Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999 gave VR agencies an automatic status as Employment Networks (ENs) and gave VR the option to choose, on a case-by-case basis, whether to serve a beneficiary under the traditional CR program or under the VR agency’s elected EN payment system (i.e., Outcome or Outcome/Milestone). In May 2008, SSA issued new TTW regulations that presented VR agencies with new opportunities to partner with other ENs in providing services to assist beneficiaries in entering and maintaining employment, and increasing their earnings. Under this new option (referred to as Partnership Plus), VR agencies no longer need Ticket assignments to be eligible to submit for CR. SSA hopes this change in policy will eliminate the perceived competition between VR agencies and ENs over ticket assignments.

The new TTW regulations, which became effective on July 21, 2008, spell out new opportunities that are available when a VR agency serves a beneficiary under CR. These regulations permit SSA to pay a VR agency for serving a beneficiary under the CR program. When the VR case is closed, the beneficiary can assign his/her Ticket to an EN that can subsequently receive Milestone and Outcome payments. If the VR agency closed the case with the beneficiary in employment, the Phase 1 Milestones are not available to the EN since VR provided the services that led to job placement. The Phase 2 Milestone and Outcome payments would be available to the EN when the beneficiary attained work and earnings adequate to trigger those payments. In creating the Partnership Plus option, SSA has created opportunities for VR agencies and ENs to partner together in providing ongoing support and job retention services to assist beneficiaries as they move towards self-supporting employment.

To assist people in understanding the many opportunities for EN/VR partnerships under the TTW Program and the new Partnership Plus option, SSA and CESSI, the Program Manager for Recruitment and Outreach for the TTW Program, are working with individual states to develop a new service delivery paradigm. Several of these approaches are described here. Some are Partnership Plus examples and some are pilot projects designed to serve certain segments of the beneficiary population. Since these approaches are evolving, some of the details are still being worked out among partnering organizations.



Connecticut: Pure Partnership Plus

The CT Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS) took the lead in convening a work group of service providers and other agency partners to explore how to utilize the Ticket Program to both encourage successful employment and expand resources for SSI and SSDI consumers. BRS supported ongoing dialogues and provided technical assistance to ensure a complete understanding of the opportunities under the new TTW Program. In an effort to take full advantage of the Partnership Plus option, BRS will serve all beneficiaries under the CR program. When VR closes a case, the beneficiary will be encouraged to assign his/her Ticket to an EN and receive ongoing support services, job retention services and other types of support. BRS expects to benefit as more beneficiaries attain the nine months of net SGA earnings that trigger CR payments. ENs expect to benefit as more resources are brought into the provider network through Phase 2 Milestone and Outcome payments. A goal is to increase the overall resources to the employment system in CT by increasing both CR payments to BRS and EN payments to community agencies.



Indiana: Pure Partnership Plus

Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) in IN operates under a “payment for results” model with its vendors. Aspects of this model are being carried over to Indiana’s approach to Partnership Plus where VRS will serve all beneficiaries under the Cost Reimbursement program. VR Counselors will encourage all beneficiaries to assign their Tickets to ENs after VR closes their cases. VRS will be asking ENs to share documentation of earnings with VRS to facilitate reimbursement. VRS is planning to offer a payment of \$1000 to ENs that are successful in stabilizing beneficiaries in employment and getting them to 8 months of net SGA earnings. VRS can include this \$1000 payment to the EN as payment for job retention services as part of their request for reimbursement for post-employment services after case closure.



Maryland: Using Partnership Plus for Supported Employment Consumers

Many service providers in MD implement evidence-based practices (EBP) in supported employment. The focus on EBP is achieved through a close working relationship between the MD Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) and the MD Mental Health Administration (MHA) which administered services through county authorities (CSAs) that are provided by community non-profit providers. A regional CSA has agreed to function as the “EN of record” and provide administrative Ticket support for a statewide system of supported employment providers that will work together under the EN umbrella to develop and execute individualized work plans and report information and data to the CSA EN. Under the plan, DORS and MHA continue to serve Ticket Holders jointly under CR until the client exits DORS through employment. At this point, the CSA accepts the beneficiary’s Ticket assignment. The CSA EN then receives Phase 2 Milestone and Outcome payments as the beneficiary achieves the required levels of work and earnings. The CSA “EN of record” keeps a small portion of each EN payment to cover the cost of providing administrative support and the remainder of each EN payment goes to the service provider that served the beneficiary.



Utah: Support Work Independence Pilot

In UT, a partnership between the Department of Human Services (DHS), the Division of Services for People with Disabilities (DSPD), the UT State Office of Rehabilitation (USOR), private providers and local businesses is looking at the Ticket Program and state “HB 45” funding as an opportunity to ensure ongoing support services for Social Security beneficiaries engaged in supported employment. Individuals who are wait-listed for supported employment services at DSPD and are eligible for “HB 45” funding are referred to USOR where they receive vocational rehabilitation services and are placed in supported employment. When these individuals are stabilized in employment for 90 days, USOR closes the case. A beneficiary with a Ticket has the option of taking his/her Ticket to an EN that provides ongoing supports. The “HB 45” funding would sustain the EN for a period of time until Ticket payments were initiated. Access to work incentives planning is an integral part of this service delivery model.



Virginia: Bonus Payments to ENs

The VA Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS) is using Partnership Plus to further its goal of expanding the total pool of resources available in the state to get beneficiaries with disabilities into the workforce, maintain their employment, and increase their earnings. DRS will serve most beneficiaries under the CR program and encourage them to assign their Tickets to ENs when VR closes these cases. To make up for the loss of Phase 1 Milestone payments, DRS offers bonus payments to ENs that successfully assist these beneficiaries. One bonus payment is available when an EN gets a beneficiary’s earnings up to SGA and another when the beneficiary attains nine months of net SGA earnings which will triggers a CR payment to DRS.

VA is also operating a small pilot program where DRS will function as an EN and work with a small group of mental health supported employment providers funded by DRS and a state-funded extended employment program. Following completion of VR services, participating beneficiaries will be encourage to go to a partnering supported employment provider to receive ongoing support services. DRS will maintain the beneficiary’s Ticket assignment and share a majority of the Milestone and Outcome payments with the provider with the expectation that this funding will be used to expand their services.



Wisconsin: TTW Pilot Project

The WI Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) is interested in promoting increased flexibility to be better equipped to provide individualized services to VR consumers. DVR is implementing a pilot project where VR Counselors will determine at the time of plan development whether to serve a beneficiary under CR or as an EN. The beneficiary's stated wage goal relative to SGA earnings and, as appropriate, vocational assessment information, including a plan for long-term employment supports, will be used to forecast capacity for weekly hours of work and earnings. Beneficiaries who are likely to achieve nine months of net SGA earnings will be served under the Partnership Plus option. Those who are not expect to attain such levels of work and earnings will be served under a pilot project where DVR will function as an EN and share Milestone and Outcome payments with entities that provide ongoing support services after closure of the VR case. In addition, DVR counselors will provide beneficiaries who are wait-listed based on the State's order of selection (OOS) with a list of ENs in the local area and information on the services these ENs provide. DVR counselors will work with all beneficiaries to help them understand the cash value and potential use of their Tickets, and the advantages of coordinating post-VR services available through ENs. Beneficiaries will be informed of WI's efforts to develop a statewide network of ENs and be told that ENs will likely be marketing their services to jointly served consumers and to OOS wait-listed referrals.

Summary

Partnership Plus models of service delivery can go a long way toward:

- Strengthening partnerships between VR agencies and ENs to expand the scope of services and supports available to assist beneficiaries in entering and re-entering the workforce.
- Establishing procedures and improving the coordination of services provided by VR agencies and ENs.
- Assisting beneficiaries through the provision of vocational rehabilitation and support services to obtain employment resulting in earnings above the applicable SGA levels and enabling them to become self-sufficient for sustained periods of time.
- Providing funding to support ongoing services and supports for beneficiaries in Supported Employment programs.
- Maintaining and expanding best practices, ethical standards, and support for consumer rights and choices.
- Maximizing CR payments for VR agencies and Ticket payments for ENs.
- Minimizing the administrative tasks associated with CR and Ticket payments.
- Ensuring that the intent and requirements of the public VR program are achieved.
- Ensuring that beneficiaries understand their options and choices under the TTW program and how work can affect their benefits.

The new TTW regulations are designed to encourage partnerships. The approaches described here are evolving and they represent only a few of the many opportunities for meaningful cooperation under the TTW program. Exciting new prospects for VR-EN partnerships mean a better mix of services for beneficiaries and improved coordination of services. The Partnership Plus option represents the first influx of new monies in many years into the service delivery system. It represents an opportunity for service providers and beneficiaries to exercise increased control over employment services. This constitutes a win-win situation for all involved.

Looking to the Future of Partnership Plus

Working in partnership with the Rehabilitation Services Administration, SSA's Office of Employment Support Programs is committed to enhancing Partnership Plus and improving relationships between State VR agencies and ENs. Although these relationships will vary depending on how the State VR agency decides to approach Partnership Plus, we expect to see significant benefits across the country for VR agencies, ENs and beneficiaries.

For More Information

To learn more about Partnership Plus, contact partnershipplus@cessi.net. To learn more about the Ticket to Work Program, visit www.ssa.gov/work.