

Partnering for Success: Jesse Brown VAMC and VA SOAR

An Innovative Practice in VHA Homeless Program Operations

White Paper

VA



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INTRODUCTION

The VHA Homeless Program Office identifies and disseminates innovative practices in homeless program operations. The Jesse Brown VA Medical Center (VAMC) has been identified as a site with an innovative practice for their delivery of SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) to increase access to benefits within VA's homeless case management operations.

PRACTICE OVERVIEW

VA homeless program social workers trained in the SOAR process are effective in connecting homeless and at-risk Veterans to Social Security benefits.

It is common knowledge that the acquisition of income is critical for the long-term, financial sustainability of Veterans exiting homelessness to permanent housing. For many Veterans who suffer from physical and mental disabilities, the path to employment may initially be out of reach.

Consequently, connecting Veterans to disability benefit income is often the preferred case planning option. To increase access to Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Income (SSDI) for eligible adults who are currently experiencing or at-risk of homelessness, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) created SOAR, a training and technical assistance initiative. Nationally, claims submitted through SOAR are determined within an average of 100 days or less. Unfortunately, access to SOAR may vary by community due to the availability of trained SOAR practitioners and a general high demand for disability benefits. Fortunately, VA homeless program social workers and other staff can fill that gap as demonstrated by the Jesse Brown VAMC's Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program.

In October 2014, two HUD-VASH staff at the Jesse Brown VAMC joined staff at four other facilities to take part in a one year SOAR pilot provided by the SAMHSA SOAR Technical Assistance Center and the VA Homeless Program Office. The purpose of the pilot was to train homeless program staff to become SOAR practitioners and to analyze SOAR's impact on increasing access to SSI and SSDI. Furthermore, the pilot sought to both understand how SOAR might be implemented at local VAMCs and to develop messaging to support internal motivation to provide SOAR, acknowledging that SOAR was not a service that VAMCs were required to provide at that time. During the summer of 2017, VA clarified this role in a memo stating that VAMCs were strongly encouraged to provide SOAR to homeless and at-risk Veterans.

The key to the SOAR process is in submitting a fully developed application to the Social Security Administration (SSA), getting the application right the first time. That means, for any conditions claimed,

sufficient medical evidence must be included in the application. SOAR providers accomplish this by managing the application process, requesting and collecting medical records, writing Medical Summary Reports (MSRs), and gathering all needed evidence into a single submission. **After completing the initial training, and by following the SOAR protocol, it took only 6 weeks for the first Veteran at the Jesse Brown VAMC to become approved for benefits.**

To make this happen, the HUD-VASH staff relied on close working relationships with social workers throughout the VAMC; primarily from residential and inpatient units. These staff are routinely asked to complete MSRs as they are often the clinicians who know the Veterans best. MSRs are a critical part of the application, providing concrete information on how the Veteran functions along with reasons why they are unable to engage in substantial, gainful employment.

Coincidentally, the HUD-VASH program was also involved in a housing surge at the same time as the SOAR pilot.

Increasingly overwhelmed with the extra duties from the surge effort, the two initial HUD-VASH trainees decided to teach all the homeless program staff to become SOAR practitioners.

These additional SOAR-trained VA staff at the Jesse Brown VAMC overwhelmingly agree that being a VA employee makes the SOAR process easier due to invaluable resources like

medical records and laboratory tests that are readily available. If a Veteran needs a neuropsychological evaluation to demonstrate cognitive limitations, the VA SOAR practitioner can ask the Veteran's primary care provider to order an evaluation. The practitioner can also accompany the Veteran to the neuropsychological evaluation appointment and personally ask the psychologist to test for certain functions. At the Jesse Brown VAMC, the homeless program is on the same floor at the VAMC as the Homeless Patient Aligned Care Team, further streamlining the collection of reports and evaluations.

While most of the Veterans engaging in SOAR at the Jesse Brown VAMC are enrolled in Grant and Per-Diem (GPD) or HUD-VASH, the VA SOAR-trained homeless program social workers may also receive referrals from the homeless walk-in clinic or the Community Resource and Referral Center (CRRC). During the pilot, VA staff were not permitted to act as the Veteran's official SSA Representative to receive correspondences. As a workaround, the team at Jesse Brown partnered with

“SOAR directly aligns with our collective mission to end Veteran homelessness. Without SOAR, the average approval rate for a person experiencing homelessness is 10-15%. With SOAR, the national average is 67% with the highest performers achieving an 84% approval rate. In addition to dramatically increasing access, SOAR can be a catalyst for VAMCs to evaluate access to other VA and mainstream benefits. For this reason, SOAR training is critical.”

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a local non-profit to serve as the official representation. This required close collaboration with the facility Information Security Officer to ensure all privacy guidelines were followed. The updated guidance issued by VA in the summer of 2017, allowed VA staff to act as the Veteran's official SSA representative, no longer necessitating the workaround.

The SOAR implementation at the Jesse Brown VAMC has evolved in the two years since the pilot ended in 2015, having established key partnerships with the local SSA office. As the SSA office was close to the VAMC, staff could arrange for an SSA representative to come onsite each week to meet Veterans and process claims. This representative, who was both familiar with Veterans experiencing homelessness and trained in SOAR, helped distribute and lessen the load from the steadily increasing demand of Veterans seeking disability benefits. Approximately 3-5 Veterans experiencing homelessness were approved each week for SSA benefits through the SOAR process from this on-site partnership. The SOAR excitement also inspired the facility's Voluntary Service to get involved as well. The service hosts a video teleconference session, four times a week, so that Veterans not currently experiencing homelessness can connect to SSA representatives and apply for disability benefits too, thus expanding access to SSA benefits for all Veterans engaged with Jesse Brown VAMC. Many assume that this is significantly helping to prevent homelessness for these Veterans in the Chicago area, providing a means of diversion due to the stable income that SSA's disability benefits provide. There is also healthy competition between VA's homeless programs, Voluntary Services, and the SSA to see which group can get the most Veterans awarded benefits each month. Unfortunately, in May of 2017, the SSA moved to a new location that is farther away from the VAMC. While the SSA representative no longer visits on site, they are still available to identify bottlenecks and smooth out process issues, as needed.

As of fall 2017, the HUD-VASH staff processes three to five SOAR applications each week, with approximately one to two Veterans approved for SSI or SSDI through the SOAR process each month.

CONCLUSION

Embracing the SOAR process at the Jesse Brown VAMC has led to an increased focus on the development of strategies across homeless programs to maximize income and increase financial stability for Veterans. A VA Caseworker's Guide to SOAR (<https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/docs/VA-SOAR-508.pdf>) is available for facilities interested in learning more. We would like to thank the staff at the Jesse Brown VAMC for taking the time to share their practice with us. For more information, please contact Mario Favela, LCSW, HUD-VASH Team Leader at Mario.Favela@va.gov.