# Supportive Services for Veteran Families

## SOAR Integration Toolkit

August 2019

SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR)

# Contents

# SOAR-SSVF Integration Toolkit

## Purpose of the SOAR-SSVF Integration Toolkit

Connecting Veterans and their families with Social Security Administration (SSA) disability benefits is a critical step to increasing income and housing stability, particularly for those Veterans whose work activity is limited by disabling conditions or who have a child with disabling conditions. SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) directly contributes to the Supportive Services for Veteran Families' (SSVF's) goal of promoting housing stability among very low-income Veteran families by increasing access to critical income supports.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) funds the SAMHSA SOAR Technical Assistance (TA) Center to lead the national SOAR initiative, which collaborates with many federal agencies including SSA, HUD, and the VA. SOAR assistance is designed to increase access to Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and/or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) for eligible children and adults who are experiencing or at-risk of homelessness and have a serious mental illness, medical impairment, and/or a co-occurring substance use disorder.

SOAR assistance is proven to increase the approval rate for those applying for benefits as well as expedite the time it takes for individuals to obtain access to such financial benefits. SOAR is not a separate income stream, but is a strategy for obtaining disability benefits more efficiently and with greater success.

SSVF Grantees are encouraged to utilize the resources in this toolkit to expand use of the SOAR model so that any Veteran with disabling conditions who is experiencing or at risk for homelessness is able to quickly connect with a SOAR provider for SSI/SSDI application assistance.

### SOAR Expansion

Beginning in October 2018, the SOAR model expanded to serve children (defined as individuals under age 18), and grantees are encouraged to assist children in Veteran families who may be eligible for SSI, in support of SSVF's intention to serve the entire Veteran household.

It is the SSVF Program Office's expectation that all grantees utilize SOAR through either direct provision, a subcontract relationship, or through a specific Memorandum of Understanding that clearly outlines referral processes and expectations across partners.

This toolkit includes:

- A discussion of the core concepts of Social Security disability benefits and the SOAR model
- Key strategies for integrating the SOAR model into community planning efforts and collaborating with community partners
- Approaches for assessing and prioritizing Veterans or children in Veteran families for SOAR assistance
- Methods of supporting dedicated SOAR Benefits Specialists within the SSVF grant
- Subcontract development with a local organization for SOAR assistance

The best practices provided in this toolkit are intended to be consistent with and complementary to SSVF program regulations and all other applicable Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) guidelines.

### The Need for SOAR

Research shows that Veterans experience high rates of traumatic brain injury (TBI), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sexual trauma, and other service-related conditions that contribute to difficulty in maintaining employment and housing. The SSVF FY 2017 Annual Report echoes these results and reports that 62 percent of Veterans served in FY 2017 had a disabling condition, twice the disability rate of the total U.S. Veteran population

(29 percent).[1]  For these individuals with disabling conditions, exploring SSI/SSDI eligibility is a key component of housing-focused supportive services.

In FY 2017, 21 percent of all SSVF program participants were children (under age 18 at program entry) and one in six Veteran households had at least one dependent child. Providing SOAR assistance to children in Veteran households is critical in bringing in additional income, which can be vital in resolving a Veteran's housing crisis and helping keep families intact. Children who qualify for SSI may also be eligible to receive Medicaid, which opens up additional treatment options and supportive services.

Individuals who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness face numerous barriers when applying for Social Security disability benefits, and high rates of denials typically result from SSA's inability to contact the individual, missed appointments, and, more generally, a lack of adequate documentation. The SOAR model was developed to address these barriers in order to increase income and housing stability.

## Integration of SOAR into SSVF Programs

SSVF grantees are critical to preventing and ending homelessness for Veteran families. They are able to provide Veteran families with time-sensitive, housing focused interventions, such as linkages to mainstream resources and income supports that promote housing stability.

As of August 2018, 250 HUD Continua of Care (CoCs) had SOAR programs in place that included SSVF grantees (of 368 CoCs reporting) and 66 CoCs were in the process of implementing the SOAR model. An additional 31 CoCs indicated to VA that they are interested in implementing the SOAR model in cooperation with SSVF.

**HUD CoCs providing SOAR Assistance with SSVF Grantee Involvement**



- Yes  68%
- In Progress  18%
- Interested  8%
- Not Yet  6%

This guide is intended to provide the tools to:

✓ Identify and describe how Veterans or children in Veteran families with disabling conditions can benefit from SSI/SSDI
✓ Utilize the free SOAR Online Courses to train staff in how to provide SOAR assistance
✓ Begin implementing SOAR best practices within SSVF grants
✓ Incorporate SOAR into community planning efforts
✓ Define the local need for SOAR assistance
✓ Establish a plan and coordinate with community partners to meet service needs

## What is the SOAR Model?

SOAR is a national program designed to provide direct assistance to individuals experiencing or at-risk of homelessness to increase access to Social Security disability benefits. Eligible individuals include children and adults who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness and have a serious mental illness, medical impairment, and/or a co-occurring substance use disorder.

- Since SOAR began in 2006, SOAR-trained staff have assisted more than **45,137 people** who were experiencing or at risk of homelessness in obtaining SSI/SSDI benefits. 39,213 persons have been approved for SSI/SSDI upon **initial** application. An additional 5,924 persons whose applications were denied initially, were approved on reconsideration or appeal.

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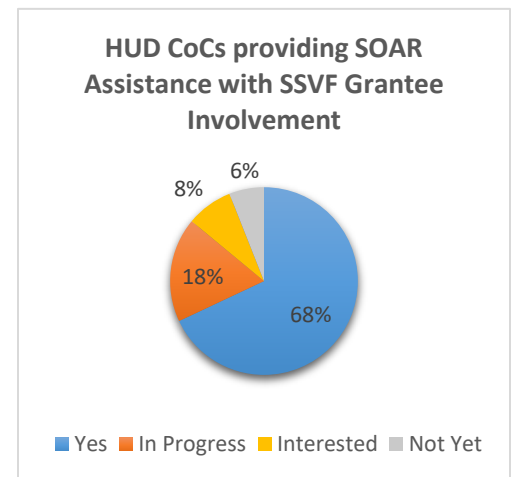
[1] U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. (2018). Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF): FY 2017 Annual Report. Retrieved from: https://www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf/docs/SSVF_FY2017_AnnualReport_508.pdf

- In 2018, SOAR-trained providers across the country maintained an average approval rate of **65 percent** for initial applications in an average of **100 days** from application date to decision[2]. The top 10 highest performing states using SOAR have served over 14,089 individuals and have an average approval rate of **82 percent** on initial applications.
- In contrast to the SOAR model's high approval rates, individuals who are experiencing homelessness and do not have SOAR application assistance have only a 10-15 percent approval rate, and all applicants regardless of housing status have a 29 percent average approval rate on initial applications. Using the SOAR critical components to assist eligible individuals in applying for SSI/SSDI is integral to successful and expedient applications.

### The SOAR Model Increases SSI/SSDI Approval Rates for Eligible Indiviudals

**82%** Average approval rate among the top 10 highest performing states using SOAR (2018)

**65%** Average national approval rate using SOAR (2018)

**29%** Average national approval rate without SOAR

**10-15%** Applicants experiencing homelessness approved for SSI/SSDI without assistance

Average Approval Rates (y-axis: 0–90)

Legend: ■ Using SOAR  ■ Without SOAR

Staff implement the SOAR model by:

- Conducting outreach to identify individuals who are eligible for SSI/SSDI
- Gathering medical records, educational records (for child SSI applications), and documenting the applicant's disabling conditions
- Connecting the applicant with any needed medical or mental health treatment or evaluations
- Providing comprehensive assistance in completing SSA application forms
- Acting as the applicant's Appointed Representative for SSI/SSDI, thereby maintaining frequent contact with SSA and ensuring SSA can contact the applicant

Successful SOAR efforts involve:

- Coordinating with medical and behavioral health treatment providers to ensure quick access to records and necessary evaluations
- Partnering with SSA and the state's Disability Determination Services (DDS) department to facilitate smooth communication throughout the SSI/SSDI application process:

### Connecting with State and Local SOAR Efforts

The SOAR model is used in all 50 states and Washington, DC,. Many local areas also have active SOAR Steering Committees, which guide implementation of the model, and SOAR Provider Workgroups, which support case workers who use SOAR. Use the SOAR State Contact Directory to connect with local and state SOAR Leaders in your area.

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[2] "2018 SOAR Outcomes." The SAMHSA SOAR TA Center. November 2018.
https://soarworks.prainc.com/sites/soarworks.prainc.com/files/2018SOAROutcomes508.pdf

- Each state DDS agency is charged with making the disability determination by gathering and evaluating medical evidence
- The name of the service can vary by state (e.g., Disability Adjudication Services, Bureau of Disability Determination) and the department may function under various state agencies (e.g., Labor, Vocational Services, or Education), but all offices follow SSA guidelines when making decisions
  - Establishing a local and/or state SOAR steering group to align SOAR efforts with the community plan to end homelessness and address barriers as they arise
  - Encouraging open communication, data sharing, and case coordination across all service providers who serve individuals experiencing homelessness

## The SAMHSA SOAR Technical Assistance (TA) Center

The SAMHSA SOAR TA Center is funded by SAMHSA and operated by Policy Research Associates, Inc. Established in 2009, the SAMHSA SOAR TA Center works with all 50 states and Washington, DC to develop and refine action plans for implementing and expanding SOAR programs, at no cost to communities. Virtual TA is also available for U.S. territories who are interested in the SOAR model.

**The SAMHSA SOAR TA Center provides a multi-step approach to SOAR implementation:**

1. Facilitating strategic planning by bringing together local stakeholders to collaborate and agree upon a SOAR process and develop an action plan for implementation
2. Training community leaders through the SOAR Leadership Academy to support SOAR-trained case workers and coordinate local SOAR programs
3. Providing individualized technical assistance to support action plan implementation, program sustainability, and quality review procedures
4. Administering the SOAR Online Course: Adult and Child Curricula to train all SOAR practitioners

### The SOAR Online Course: Adult and Child Curricula

The SAMHSA SOAR TA Center administers two free, self-paced, online courses for assisting with SSI applications for children or SSI/SSDI applications for adults. Each course consists of seven classes, with articles, videos, and short quizzes, as well as the completion of a full practice SSI/SSDI application for a fictitious adult applicant, or an SSI application for a fictitious child applicant, using provided materials. Each course is accredited by the National Association of Social Workers for 20 Continuing Education Units.

*Before beginning to use the SOAR model, all providers must successfully complete the SOAR Online Course, as well as any additional training requirements in place in the provider's state or locality.*

### SOAR Online Application Tracking (OAT) System

The SAMHSA SOAR TA Center administers the OAT system, which is a free, web-based, HIPAA-compliant tracking system for data indicators related to SSI/SSDI applications for adults and SSI applications for children that are filed using the SOAR model. The OAT system is different from your community Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) in that it only tracks outcomes related to SSI/SSDI applications, and data for each Veteran or child can be entered into OAT in just a few minutes.

OAT does not collect any personally identifiable information on applicants but does track indicators such as:

- SSI/SSDI approval rates and award amounts
- Days to decision
- SOAR critical components used during the application process
- Employment income during and after SSI/SSDI application, and
- Connection to housing

Tracking outcomes on SOAR-assisted SSI/SSDI applications is important not only for documenting progress in helping individuals obtain income, but for helping with quality review and targeting technical assistance needs, both on the local and national level. Grantees can analyze data indicators in OAT to identify barriers to implementation and training needs, as well as to highlight and celebrate local progress in benefits acquisition. Each July, the SAMHSA SOAR TA Center collects outcomes on SSI/SSDI applications that use the SOAR model and publishes this data in an annual report. View the current SOAR National Outcomes Report.

*Additional Resources from the SAMHSA SOAR TA Center*
The SAMHSA SOAR TA Center has comprehensive resources dedicated to developing SOAR programs and training staff in the SOAR model. National SOAR experts are also available to provide individualized TA to SSVF grantees interested in SOAR. Visit the SAMHSA SOAR TA Center's website to learn more.

# Getting Started: Eligibility for Disability Benefits

Veterans who have severe mental or physical health conditions may be eligible for disability benefits from the SSA in conjunction with, or as an alternative to, disability benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Children in Veteran households who have severe mental or physical health conditions and have low income and resources may be eligible for SSI.

## VA Disability Benefits

The Veterans Benefits Administration oversees the disability compensation and pension programs for eligible Veterans who have disabling conditions and who were discharged under conditions other than dishonorable.

- **Disability Compensation**, also known as service-connected disability, is a monetary benefit paid to qualifying Veterans who are disabled by an injury or illness that was incurred or aggravated during active military service. Benefits are paid on a graduated scale from 10 to 100 percent.
- **Pensions** are needs-based cash benefits paid to low-income wartime Veterans who have limited resources and assets and who are over 65 or have a permanent and total non-service connected disability. Applicants generally need to show that they served for at least 90 days, with at least one day of service during a wartime period. Those who entered the military after 1980 may have longer service requirements.

While this toolkit focuses on increasing access to SSA disability benefits, Veterans should concurrently explore any VA disability benefits for which they may qualify by visiting the Veterans Benefit Administration at: https://benefits.va.gov/benefits/.

## Social Security Disability Basics

SSA administers two disability programs that can assist Veterans and their families:

- **Supplemental Security Income (SSI)** is a needs-based program for children and adults who are blind or disabled, or adults over age 65, and who have limited income and resources.[3]
- **Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI)** provides benefits to adults and certain family members who are insured through employee and employer contributions to the Social Security Trust Fund and who are unable to work at a substantial gainful level due to disabling conditions. SSDI eligibility does not take into account income or resources. The monthly benefit amount will vary by individual, based on work history.

In most states, Medicaid and/or Medicare health insurance accompany these benefits for eligible individuals.

### SSA Expedited Processing for Veterans

Veterans may qualify for SSA programs that will expedite their disability decisions:

*100% Permanent and Total Veterans Initiative*
Veterans who have a 100% Permanent and Total (P&T) disability rating from the VA qualify for this expedited application process. When initiating the SSI/SSDI application, Veterans should identify themselves as a "Veteran rated 100% P&T" and provide the VA rating notification letter to SSA.

*Wounded Warriors*
Veterans who sustained disabling mental or physical health injuries while on active duty on or after October 1, 2001 are eligible for expedited SSI/SSDI application processing. The injury does not need to have occurred during combat operations. When initiating the SSI/SSDI application, Veterans should inform SSA that their injury occurred while on active duty.

More information about SSA expedited processing can be found on the SSA website.

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[3] For U.S. territories, only residents in the Northern Mariana Islands are eligible for both SSI and SSDI. Residents of all other territories are eligible for SSDI if they meet the medical and non-medical criteria for the SSDI program and are not eligible for SSI.

## SSA's Definition of Disability for Adults and Children

For adults, both the definition of disability and the application process are different for SSA and VA disability benefits. Veterans may begin receiving SSA benefits while they are waiting on a VA benefit decision. For children under age 18 who are applying for SSI, the definition of disability is different than adult SSI. Understanding these differences is key to providing effective assistance to Veterans and their families.

*Definition of Disability for Adults (SSI/SSDI):*
SSA defines disability for adults as:

1. A medically determinable physical or mental health impairment, and
2. Which results in functional impairments that limit his or her ability to work at a substantial gainful level (quantified as $1,220/month in 2019),[4] and
3. That has lasted, or is expected to last, for a continuous period of at least 12 months or is expected to result in death

Unlike VA disability benefits, SSI/SSDI does not require the Veteran's disability to be linked to his or her military service, does not take into account a Veteran's discharge status, and does not pay on a graduated scale.

*Definition of Disability for Children (SSI only):*
SSA defines disability for children as:

1. A medically determinable physical or mental impairment (including an emotional or a learning problem) or a combination of impairments, and
2. Which causes marked and severe functional limitations, and
3. That has lasted, or is expected to last, for a continuous period of at least 12 months or is expected to result in death

For children, SSA is evaluating how a child's functional abilities compare to the functional abilities of a child of the same age who does not have physical or mental impairments. SSA will also evaluate the income and resources of the child, and the child's parents who are living in the household[5], as SSI is a needs-based program.

## How Income from VA Benefits and Employment Impact Social Security Payments

As part of an income support and benefits strategy, programs also assist the Veteran in obtaining income from additional sources, such as VA disability benefits or employment. Fear and misinformation about how additional income will impact SSI or SSDI benefits often prevents individuals from pursuing work or other benefits[6], and SSVF case managers play a critical role in providing accurate, supportive guidance.

*Additional Income from VA Disability Benefits*
Veterans who receive VA disability benefits may also receive SSA benefits, depending on the VA benefit amount received and if they are approved for SSI or SSDI.

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[4] This amount changes yearly. For current substantial gainful activity amounts, visit: https://www.ssa.gov/oact/cola/sga.html.

[5] The deeming (or consideration) of parental income is limited to natural or adoptive parents and the spouse of a parent (i.e. step parents) who are living in the household and are not eligible for SSI. The income and resources of other guardians (e.g. relatives) or legal guardians does not apply. For more information, see the *SSA Spotlight on Deeming Parental Income and Resources:* https://www.ssa.gov/ssi/spotlights/spot-deeming.htm

[6] Gettens, J., Henry, A. D., Laszlo, A., & Himmelstein, J. (2012). The Prospect of Losing Benefits and the Work Decisions of Participants in Disability Programs: A Cross-Program Comparison. Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 23(3), 179–189. https://doi.org/10.1177/1044207311429345

## Supplemental Security Income (SSI)

Since SSI is a needs-based program, additional income from VA benefits will affect the SSI cash benefit amount. SSA classifies VA benefits as "unearned income," as these benefits do not come from paid employment. The VA benefit will be deducted dollar for dollar from the SSI federal payment amount, after a general exclusion of $20.

For example, Paul receives partial VA benefits of $400 per month, and has been approved for SSI. The following table illustrates how the VA benefits will affect his SSI cash benefit:

| VA Disability Income and SSI | Amount |
|---|---|
| **VA Monthly Disability Benefit Amount** | $400 |
| *General Exclusion* | *- $20* |
| Counted Income | = $380 |
| Maximum Monthly SSI Benefit Amount (2019 rates) | $771 |
| *Counted Income* | *- $380* |
| **Monthly SSI Amount** | = $391 |
| **Total Monthly Income (VA + SSI benefit amounts)** | **$791** |

> Veterans who are approved for a VA pension **will not qualify** to receive SSI because the pension amount is higher than the SSI payment amount, which reduces the SSI payment amount to zero in the equation above. However, these Veterans may qualify to receive SSDI if they've earned enough work credits through SSA.

## SSDI

Alternatively, SSDI benefits are not affected by unearned income through VA benefits, and any SSDI benefits received will be added to the VA benefit amount. In this example, Jane receives partial VA benefits of $400 per month. Because she worked and paid into the Social Security system, she now receives $850 per month in SSDI. Her VA and SSDI monthly benefit amounts will be added together:

| Benefit | Monthly Income |
|---|---|
| **VA Monthly Disability Benefit Amount** | $400 |
| **SSDI Monthly Benefit Amount** | + $850 |
| **Total Monthly Income (VA + SSDI payments)** | = $1250 |

### *Additional Income from Employment*

SSVF providers are encouraged to support individuals to pursue their vocational goals while ensuring income limitations do not impede rapid access to permanent housing using a Housing First approach:

It is a common myth that an applicant cannot be approved for SSI/SSDI benefits if he or she is working during the application process.

- **Individuals can work during the SSI/SSDI application process** and information gathered from work activity can help strengthen the SSI/SSDI application by documenting any functional limitations an individual experiences at work.
- For adults, SSA looks at the *type* and *amount* of work completed to see if an individual can maintain "substantial gainful activity (SGA)," quantified as earning $1,220/month (2019 amount), or if they have difficulties in maintaining this level of work activity due to disabling conditions.

## VA Income and Benefit Calculators

Policy Research Associates, Inc. (PRA) developed the VA Income and Benefit Calculators in 2018 to help encourage individuals to utilize SSA work incentives to maximize their income. SSVF grantees are encouraged to use the VA Income and Benefit Calculators when working with Veterans who are exploring how to maximize their income while receiving SSI or SSDI. There are separate calculators for SSI and SSDI beneficiaries, which provide a visual and calculated representation of how increasing income from employment and/or VA disability benefits will affect their overall income. These tools can provide a powerful example of how Veterans can maximize their income using a number of sources, while dispelling myths about losing disability benefits when returning to work.

### SSI

Similar to the example above, SSI cash benefits will be reduced based on the amount of income the Veteran receives from employment; however, SSA will only count $1 for every $2 earned, after a general exclusion and other work incentives are applied. In addition to the general income exclusion, the Veteran may also qualify for additional work incentives:

- *Earned Income Exclusion*: SSA will exclude the first $65 a person earns from working.
- *Plan to Achieve Self-Support (PASS)* allows an SSI recipient to save money for an educational or vocational goal in a separate account, which is not counted as a resource or countable income when determining the SSI payment.
- *Impairment Related Work Expense (IRWE)*: an out-of-pocket expense that enables the person to go to work. The expense must be related to the disability, such as medication co-pays, special equipment, and special transportation.

In this example, Sam has gross earnings of $800 per month from employment and is saving $100 per month towards tuition for an engineering training program. He also pays $50 per month in medication co-pays for prescriptions that help manage his arthritis and back pain, enabling him to work three days per week.
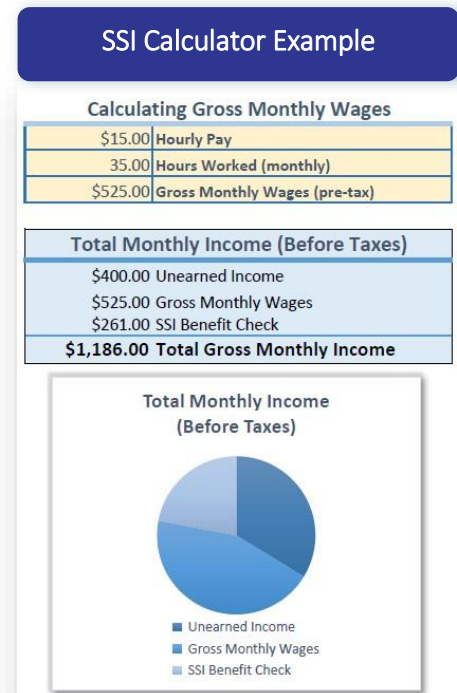
| Work Incentives for SSI | Amount |
|---|---:|
| **Gross Earnings from Work** | $800 |
| *General Exclusion* | - $20 |
| *Earned Income Exclusion* | - $65 |
| *PASS Savings* | - $100 |
| *Impairment Related Work Expense (IRWE)* | - $50 |
| Total Amount After Exclusions | = $565 |
| *Divide in Half (SSA counts $1 for every $2 earned)* | $565/2 |
| Counted Income | = $282.50 |
| Maximum Monthly SSI Benefit Amount (2019 rates) | $771 |
| *Subtract Counted Income* | - $282.50 |
| **Monthly SSI Amount** | = $488.50 |
| **Total Monthly Income (VA + SSI Benefit Amounts)** | **$1288.50** |

## SSDI

Since SSDI is the program you pay into when you work, SSA has work incentives that encourage a return to work:

- *Trial Work Period (TWP):* Nine months in a rolling 5-year period, during which a person can work as much as they are able and still keep their full SSDI check. These nine months do not need to be consecutive.
- After the TWP, there is an *Extended Period of Eligibility (EPE)*, a 3-year period during which in any month that a person isn't able to earn over the SGA amount, they are eligible to receive their full SSDI check.
- *Subsidy*: a value put on the extra support that an employer provides, such as a job coach, or reduced workload for an individual with disabilities. Subsidies, along with *IRWEs*, can be used by SSDI recipients to reduce countable income during the EPE.  If earnings can be reduced below SGA, benefit payments would continue.

## Expedited Reinstatement of Benefits

For both SSI and SSDI recipients, there is a five-year period after cash benefits end due to earnings from work that allows an expedited return to cash and medical benefits if someone is unable to continue earning above SGA due to his or her disabling condition(s).

- Social Security will review the request to determine if the disabling condition is the same as, or related to, the impairment in the original claim. Applicants can receive up to six months of benefits while the decision is processed.
- These provisional benefits do not need to be repaid if the reinstatement request is denied, as long as the applicant applied in good faith, believing he or she meets SSI or SSDI criteria.
- An individual can request an expedited reinstatement of benefits at their local Social Security office.

> **SSA's Ticket to Work Program**
>
> Benefits planning is essential for Veterans who are receiving SSI/SSDI and pursuing employment.
>
> Ticket to Work is a free program available to all SSI/SSDI beneficiaries. SSA has specialists that can connect individuals to employment supports in their area, such as career counseling, training, and job placement. Also, they can explain in detail how going back to work will impact a person's benefits.
>
> SSA's Ticket to Work website has links to local employment resources and offers free training webinars for beneficiaries and service providers.

### *Additional Income and Child SSI*

As noted in SSA's definition of disability for child SSI, additional income from the child and/or the child's parent(s) could affect the SSI benefit amount and continued eligibility for SSI.

## Earned and Unearned Income Received by the Child

Similar to SSI for adults, child SSI beneficiaries who are receiving unearned income (such as from public benefits) or earned income from employment could have their SSI cash benefit reduced. SSA will apply the same exclusions and work incentives to child SSI benefits as they do for adult SSI, described above. In addition, SSA has additional work incentives for children who are pursuing certain internships, apprenticeships, or who are regularly attending school. Especially relevant for youth is the Student Earned Income Exclusion (SEIE), available to certain SSI recipients who are under age 22 and regularly attending school, which reduces countable income and maximizes SSI benefits. Find out more about these work incentives in the SSA Red Book: A Guide to Work Incentives.

## Earned and Unearned Income Received by the Parent

Additional income received by the parent(s) (includes the natural or adoptive parent and the spouse of a parent) in the child's household could affect a child's continued eligibility for SSI. If the parent is not also receiving SSI benefits, SSA will consider their earned and unearned income (along with other factors including the number of children in the household and relevant exclusions) when determining if the child meets the eligibility requirements related to income. The rules around this evaluation, known as "deeming," are complex and grantees are encouraged to connect families with their local SSA Field Office for support.

# SOAR and the Federal Criteria and Benchmarks for Ending Veteran Homelessness

The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the VA have developed specific criteria and benchmarks for ending homelessness among Veterans and ensuring that homelessness is rare, brief, and one time.[7]

## Integrating SOAR into Community Efforts to End Veteran Homelessness

Using the SOAR model to help Veterans achieve income stability directly contributes to the Federal Criteria and Benchmarks by *keeping Veterans housed and sustaining an end to individual Veteran homelessness.* Communities can use the organizing principles in the Criteria and Benchmarks as a way to promote SOAR best practices:

### Criteria 1: The community has identified all Veterans experiencing homelessness

- When identifying Veterans, establish an assessment and referral procedure for those who report disabling mental health or medical conditions and who desire linkages to other income, so that income supports are fully incorporated into outreach and identification efforts of currently homeless Veterans.
- After successfully identifying all Veterans experiencing homelessness, continue to assess their needs and eligibility for SSI/SSDI benefits, prioritze them for services, and begin SOAR assistance.

### Criteria 2: The community provides shelter immediately to any Veteran experiencing unsheltered homelessness who wants it

- Train housing and shelter providers in SSI/SSDI eligibility requirements and SOAR referral procedures, so that upon intake into shelter, Veterans and their families can be quickly connected to SSI/SSDI assistance.
- As part of housing-focused supportive services, provide resources and information on how SSI/SSDI income can help increase housing stability in the medium and longer term.

### Criteria 3: The community provides service-intensive transitional housing (SITH) only in limited instances

- Quickly connect Veterans who choose Transitional Housing and have serious mental or medical health conditions with SOAR-trained staff to evaluate SSI/SSDI eligibility. Provide these Veterans with information about how SSI/SSDI benefits can help them maintain housing stability when moving to permanent housing.
- Where Veterans utilize bridge housing, connect them with a SOAR specialist who can expedite the benefit process and continue the application process as they are placed in permanent housing.

### Criteria 4: The community has capacity to assist Veterans to swiftly move into permanent housing

- Engage with landlords to provide information about how Veteran families who have SSI/SSDI income have stable sources of income to pay rent, in efforts to open up new competitive permanent housing opportunities.

### Criteria 5: The community has resources, plans, partnerships, and system capacity in place should any Veteran become homeless or be at risk of homelessness in the future

- Integrate SOAR into the local coordinated or centralized entry system, so that eligible indiviudals receive a rapid referral to SOAR Benefits Specialists to promote longer term housing stability.

From initial outreach and engagement, to rapid re-housing and homelessness prevention efforts, integrating the SOAR model into housing focused services helps to support long term housing stability.

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[7] Guidance from USICH on the criteria and benchmarks is available here:
https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Criteria_and_Benchmarks_for_Ending_Veteran_Homelessness_June_2019_Update.pdf

# Assessing and Prioritizing Veterans for SOAR Assistance

Assessment for income support needs and referral to appropriate mainstream resources is critical in helping Veteran families retain permanent housing. Assessment and prioritization can happen at both the individual grantee level and the community level (for those communities that are further along in SOAR implementation).

Veterans and their family members who have disabling conditions may be eligible for SSI/SSDI, VA benefits, and mainstream resources, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Veterans may also be able to increase their income through employment in combination with these benefits.
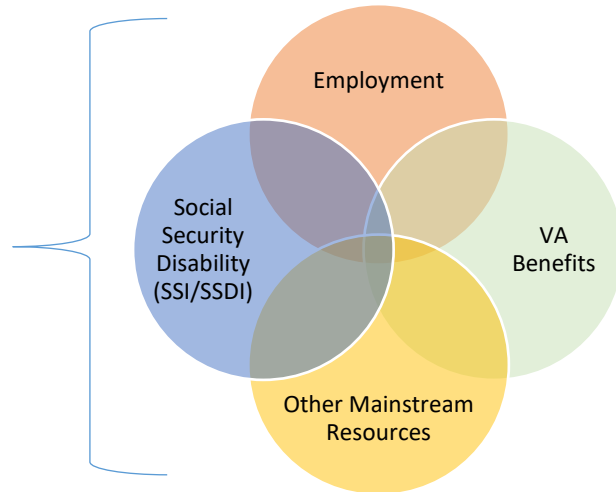
The goal is to find the **individualized, appropriate combination of income supports** that each Veteran family needs for permanent housing and pursue those opportunities while concurrently focusing on identifying a permanent housing unit or resource for the Veteran. **However, income should never be a reason to screen a Veteran away from SSVF services.**

## Grantee Level Assessments: Key SSI/SSDI Eligibility Indicators

As SSVF staff complete housing-focused needs assessments with Veteran families, awareness of the SSI/SSDI eligibility criteria facilitates rapid identification of individuals who are potentially eligible for SOAR assistance and referral to appropriate resources.

### Identifying Adult SSI/SSDI Applicants
The following characteristics represent key eligibility criteria for **adult** SSA disability benefits:

1. Applicant has or exhibits symptoms of a serious mental illness and/or has serious physical illnesses that affect his or her ability to work at a substantial gainful level ($1,220/month in 2019).
2. The illnesses or conditions have lasted or are expected to last for at least 12 months, or result in death.
3. For an applicant with mental illness, he or she has significant limitations in at least two of these areas of mental functioning:
     - Understand, remember, or apply information (memory, following instructions, solving problems, etc.)
     - Interact with others (getting along with others, anger, avoidance, etc.)
     - Concentrate, persist, or maintain pace (as they relate to the ability to complete tasks)
     - Adapt or manage oneself (hygiene, responding to change, setting realistic goals, etc.)

### Identifying Child SSI Applicants
The following characteristics represent key eligibility criteria for **child** (under age 18) SSA disability benefits:

1. Child has a serious mental and/or physical illness, or combination of illnesses.
2. The illnesses or conditions have lasted or are expected to last for at least 12 months or are expected to result in death.

3. For children with mental illness, he or she has documentation of medical criteria and marked limitation of two, or extreme limitation of one of the following areas of mental functioning:
    o Understand, remember, or apply information (understanding and learning terms, instructions, procedures; identifying and solving problems, etc.)
    o Interact with others (cooperating with others; keeping social interactions free of excessive irritability, sensitivity, argumentativeness, or suspiciousness, etc.)
    o Concentrate, persist, or maintain pace (initiating and performing an activity that the child understands and knows how to do; changing activities without being disruptive, etc.)
    o Adapt or manage oneself (maintaining personal hygiene; adapting to changes, etc.)
4. For children with physical or mental health conditions, he or she struggles to do things on a day-to-day basis that other children their age who do not have impairments typically do in the following six broad domains of functioning:
    o Acquiring and using information (learning and using new information)
    o Attending and completing tasks (focusing and maintaining attention, keeping pace in carrying out tasks)
    o Interacting and relating with others (initiating and sustaining emotional connections with others, cooperating with others, complying with rules, responding to criticism, and taking care of possessions)
    o Moving about and manipulating objects (considering the development of gross-and fine-motor skills)
    o Caring for themselves (personal care, including both physical and emotional health, coping with stress and a changing environment)
    o Health and physical well-being (cumulative physical effects of physical or mental impairments and their associated treatment or therapies on the child's functioning)

> **Grantee Tips for Identifying Eligible Veterans and their Family Members**
>
> Provide training to SSVF case management staff on the key SSI/SSDI eligibility indicators and establish an internal referral process for individuals who are potentially eligible for SOAR assistance. Staff awareness training ideas include holding a "lunch and learn" on SOAR, discussing SSI/SSDI criteria at case consultation meetings, and encouraging staff to take the first class of the SOAR Online Course: Adult or Child Curriculum (depending on the population served) as a "SOAR 101."

## Advanced SOAR Implementation: Community-Level Identification and Prioritization

Service areas that have already established grantee-level procedures for identifying and assessing Veteran families for SOAR may begin to scale up to community-level coordination, identification, and prioritization of adults and children who are eligible for SSI/SSDI. CoCs across the country are all at different stages of community planning to end Veteran homelessness; prior to implementing the following guidance, it is important to assess if these tools are in use in your community and if you are ready to move forward.

> ### Assessing Readiness for Community-Level SOAR Implementation
>
> At a minimum, it is recommended that your community have:
>
> 1. One or more service providers with staff who have completed the SOAR Online Course: Adult Curriculum or SOAR Online Course: Child Curriculum (if serving family members under age 18)
> 2. An established referral procedure, with a provider-level process for prioritizing services for individuals who are referred
> 3. A local planning or steering committee that meets regularly to discuss barriers in the SOAR process

When your community is ready for the next stages of implementation, the following systems and tools may be helpful in creating a community-level plan for identifying and prioritizing individuals for SOAR assistance.

### Coordinated Entry Systems

HUD requires all CoCs to establish and operate a [coordinated or centralized assessment system](#) to increase the efficiency of their local crisis response systems, ensuring easy and fair access to resources for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. A critical aspect of coordinated entry systems is assessing an individual or family's need for housing and supportive services and providing quick connections to housing and service providers.

Many communities are incorporating basic SSI/SSDI eligibility questions into their coordinated entry assessments, so that individuals who may qualify for Social Security disability benefits receive immediate referrals to local SOAR providers. These assessments for income support needs are done concurrently with housing-related needs assessments, such that individuals experiencing homelessness are rapidly placed into housing and referred to appropriate supportive services as needed and desired.

### Common Assessment Tools

Common Assessment tools are a required element of Coordinated Entry. Already being used in many coordinated entry systems and CoCs, Common Assessment Tools quickly assess the health and social needs of individuals experiencing homelessness so they can be matched with appropriate housing resources.

Below are indicators from Common Assessment Tools that may help identify potential eligibility for adult SSA disability benefits and appropriate SOAR referral:

- Past hospitalization against the person's will and/or current mental health treatment
- Self-report of multiple physical health conditions or observations of serious health conditions
- Tri-morbidity (co-occurring mental and substance use disorder with a chronic medical condition)
- Observations of poor hygiene or living skills
- History of serious brain injury or head trauma
- Difficulty in concentrating and remembering things
- Self-reported disability or diagnoses information

For children, indicators of potential eligibility for SSI and appropriate SOAR referral include:

- Recurrent hospitalizations or need for medical treatment due to mental or physical health conditions

- Special accommodations at school or home, such as an Individualized Education Program (IEP), 504 accommodations, special education, or early intervention services (if under the age of three)
- Frequently missing school due to physical or behavioral health conditions
- Reports from the child and/or parent that the child needs more help than a child of the same age without an impairment needs
- Child lives, or has lived for a period of time, in a residential facility or school designed for children with functional support needs

Common Assessment Tools are only one "tool in the toolbox" as part of a community's overall housing prioritization strategy. However, using the Common Assessment to identify those who would benefit through SOAR assistance, we recommend targeting those who report serious medical or mental health conditions, and rank highest on the housing prioritization list.

### Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)

HMIS is a locally managed data system maintained by CoCs to record and analyze individual, service, and housing data for individuals and families who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Grantees participate in the local HMIS system and input data about Veteran families served through their program.

Communities may utilize the local HMIS system to identify individuals who report having disabling conditions, but who have not yet been assessed for SSI/SSDI eligibility through SOAR. While many individuals entered into HMIS have been assessed and offered services, running reports based on the indicators below may identify any Veterans who still need this connection to supportive services.

For Veteran families served by SSVF, analyzing the following data indicators may help identify eligible individuals and signal the need for a SOAR referral:

- Individual does not receive income from SSI/SSDI and has low income from other sources (VA data indicator 4.2)
- Individual reports a physical disability, developmental disability, chronic health condition, or mental health condition that substantially impairs ability to live independently (HMIS data elements 4.5-4.9)
- A connection with SOAR has not been made (HMIS data element P4)

Individuals meeting this criteria should be prioritized for an SSI/SSDI assessment by a SOAR provider. Additional information on VA data indicators is located in the FY 2019 VA Data Guide: Data Collection and Reporting Guidance for SSVF Grantees. Additional information about HMIS universal data standards can be found in the FY 2020 HMIS Data Standards Manual.

### Master / By-Name Lists

To meet the goal of ending Veteran homelessness, communities are developing master lists, also known as "by-name" lists, of all Veterans who are experiencing homelessness in the community. These lists are populated using data from HMIS and other community sources and are used to track progress towards housing, as well as to coordinate services provided to the Veteran. Integrating elements such as Common Assessment scores or high medical acuity indicators into the master list facilitates targeting of SOAR assistance to those who have the most severe service needs and are likely to be eligible for disability benefits. Again, Master/By-Name lists primarily focus on moving Veterans into housing quickly without barriers such as income; however, concurrent to or after that housing process has taken place the Master/By-Name list may be a useful tool for SOAR referrals.

### Case Coordination among Community Partners

Case coordination, also known as "case conferencing," is integral to all of the referenced methods for identifying, assessing, and prioritizing Veterans for SOAR assistance. Grantees should work in collaboration with community partners and convene frequently to discuss how the needs (e.g., housing and income support assistance through SOAR) of Veterans experiencing homelessness in their community are being met. Progress towards helping Veteran families achieve income and housing stability should be reviewed at each meeting. If not already in place, grantees should work to arrange data-sharing agreements with partners to ensure open communication.

SSVF is fully committed to Housing First and to ensuring that no unnecessary barriers, including lack of income, inhibit grantee efforts to rapidly housing Veterans experiencing homelessness. The pursuit of cash benefits or other income supports are an important element to promoting housing stability, but in no way should such income maximization efforts be required as a precondition to housing. Housing is always the first priority for Veterans experiencing or at-risk of homelessness; income maximization efforts should happen concurrent (if appropriate) to or after the immediate housing crisis has been resolved.

## Using SOAR with Rapid Resolution and Problem-Solving Conversations

In 2018, the SSVF Program Office introduced Rapid Resolution, also known in some communities as diversion, rapid exit, or problem-solving conversations. Rapid Resolution is a housing intervention designed to prevent immediate entry into homelessness or to immediately resolve a household's homelessness once they enter shelter, transitional housing, or an unsheltered situation.

In a Rapid Resolution intervention, SSVF and its partners work to help a household identify an immediate safe place to stay within their own network of family, friends, and other social or community supports, even if that solution is temporary. SSVF and other partners can then, as needed, provide follow-up services and supports, such as SOAR assistance and income support services, to help the Veteran find stable long-term housing.

*Connection with Income Supports in a Rapid Resolution Intervention*

While the primary goal of Rapid Resolution is to resolve the immediate housing crisis, the individualized, problem-solving conversations enable providers to understand the unique needs and assets of the household presenting for assistance and use that rapport to identify connections the household may have outside of the homeless crisis response system.

Referral for SOAR assistance may be appropriate if the housing crisis was precipitated by:

- A loss of income as a result of difficulty maintaining work due to mental or physical health conditions
- Financial difficulties due to caring for a child who has functional limitations due to mental or physical impairments
- Disruption or suspension of SSI/SSDI benefits

The focus in these problem-solving conversations is finding a safe place for the Veteran or Veteran family to live while connection with housing and income support services is made.

# Integrating SOAR into Community Planning Efforts

Community planning and coordination is essential for ensuring that systems are in place to end and prevent Veteran homelessness. SSVF grantees are expected to be fully integrated into existing and planned community efforts.

## Using the Community Planning Process to Estimate Need for SOAR

Use *SSVF's System Assessment and Improvement Toolkit* to gather information about and connect with key stakeholders in your community, such as CoC leaders, supportive service and housing providers, hospitals, jails, and other providers who may work with Veterans experiencing or at risk of homelessness. When assessing gaps in community services for Veterans and Veteran families, consider the following questions:

- How many Veterans experiencing homelessness in the community report having severe medical or behavioral health conditions and are not currently receiving SSI/SSDI? *(Information may be gathered from annual Point-in-Time Count Sub-Population Report, HMIS, or other community data repository).*
- For Veterans prioritized as having high service needs through Coordinated Entry, how quickly are they referred to a SOAR provider and assessed for eligibility?
- How quickly and by what means are Veterans in SITH and Bridge Housing being connected with a SOAR provider to assess eligibility?

- For Veterans with family members who have disabling conditions, by what means are they being assessed for SSI/SSDI eligibility and connected with a SOAR provider?
- Are Veterans with limited income who are moving into permanent housing being assessed for SSI/SSDI eligibility before SSVF close-out?

Grantees can help the community estimate the number of SOAR providers needed to meet the demand for services using local data on Veteran homelessness. If the number of potentially eligible Veterans who are not currently receiving SOAR assistance is under 50, the community may need 1-2 dedicated SOAR Benefits Specialists to meet the demand; however, if your community reports high levels of need, (e.g., 150 potentially eligible Veterans or more), action planning should focus on developing a larger team of SOAR providers. Grantees are encouraged to use the *Determining Local Needs for SOAR Assistance* assessment (Appendix I) in community planning efforts.

## Collaborating with Community Partners to Efficiently File SSI/SSDI Applications

In addition to collaborating to assess and prioritize Veterans and their family members for services, all community partners have an important role in ensuring the SSI/SSDI application process goes smoothly. By working together, SOAR providers are able to quickly identify eligible applicants, gather medical documentation, and efficiently assist the Veteran or family member with applying for Social Security disability benefits.

*Key Community Partnerships for Planning and Implementing SOAR*
There are a number of partners who can provide valuable information about a Veteran's conditions and the resulting limitation in maintaining employment and housing. If you are assisting a Veteran's child in applying for SSI, connections with the local school system can be helpful in gathering information about a child's limitations in functioning. Other important partners, such as SSA/DDS representatives and local SOAR leaders, help address barriers as they arise and facilitate open communication.

Key partnerships include:

- Local and/or State SSA and DDS representatives
- Hospitals and clinics (both VA and non-VA)
- Street outreach teams
- Jail and prison social work or medical teams
- Housing providers
- Supported employment programs or Vocational Rehabilitation
- State and local SOAR leaders, and the National SAMHSA SOAR TA Center Liaison
- *For child SSI applications:* education providers such as school counselors or psychologists, McKinney-Vento school district liaisons, and special education teachers

These partnerships allow SOAR providers to quickly obtain referrals for eligible applicants and gather comprehensive documentation to support SSI/SSDI applications. This significantly decreases the time it takes to complete and file an SSI/SSDI application using the SOAR model, thus increasing staff capacity to serve Veterans.

# Supporting Dedicated Benefits Specialists within the SSVF Grant

SSVF grantees are encouraged to train program staff in the SOAR model to assist eligible Veterans and their family members in applying for SSI/SSDI. Grantees can use the free SOAR Online Course: Adult or Child Curriculum for staff training and the SSVF program change process to integrate dedicated benefits specialists into staff teams. In order to be considered SOAR-trained, a SSVF grantee or subcontractor **must** complete the full online training curriculum through the SAMHSA SOAR TA Center. This training requirement cannot be substituted for alternative trainings.

## Dedicated Benefits Specialists in SSVF Programs

Grantees should assess what SOAR resources currently exist in the communities that they serve. For example, the local SOAR lead organization may have the capacity to handle all SOAR-assisted applications if SSVF could provide financial assistance and/or supportive services. In these cases, especially if a grantee is small or has a different area of expertise, it might make sense to build the capacity of the existing resource. In other cases, establishing Benefits Specialists within SSVF may be beneficial. These Benefits Specialists may work on SOAR as well as other benefits, or they may solely focus on SOAR. This would be determined based on need and demand for services. Another option that grantees could pursue is cost-sharing amongst grantees. Please note that all strategies related to staffing should be seen within the larger community context and should be part of the community planning discussion.

Use estimates of your community's need for SOAR (from the *Integrating SOAR into Community Planning Efforts*) to identify the service model that is most appropriate for your program.
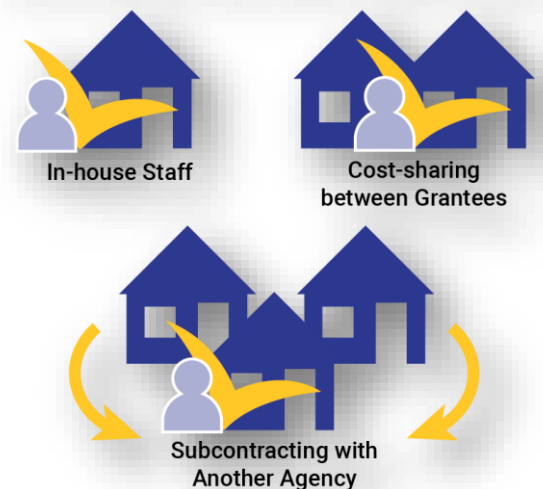
## Cost-Sharing between Grantees to Support SOAR Benefits Specialists

After analyzing need and organizational capacity, multiple SSVF grantees in a service area may decide that pooling their resources to create one or more Benefits Specialist positions, rather than a single grantee funding all SOAR assistance, would be the most appropriate model to use. In this model, grantees could split the costs evenly between themselves, or divide the costs proportionally to their grant size.

For example, a service area with three SSVF grantees decides that to meet their SOAR assistance needs, they require four dedicated SOAR Benefits Specialists, which they would pool their resources to fund so that Veterans served by any of the three grantees could access SOAR assistance.

They could choose to split the costs of supporting these specialists evenly between themselves, where each pays for one-third of the total cost. Alternatively, they may split the costs proportionally according to their grant size. In this scenario, Grantee #1 has the largest grant, followed by Grantee #2, then Grantee #3.

| Proportionally pooling resources | Percent of costs paid |
|---|---|
| Grantee #1 | 45% of the total cost |
| Grantee #2 | 35% of the total cost |
| Grantee #3 | 20% of the total cost |

SSVF grantees using this model may choose the cost-sharing option that is most appropriate in meeting community needs. After agreeing on a cost-sharing option, the grantees will then decide if the staffing will be

split between the organizations, housed together at a single SSVF grantee site, or if the funds will be used to subcontract with a local agency that has expertise in using the SOAR model. Similar to the cost-sharing decision, grantees are encouraged to view these decisions within the larger community planning context, to best fit community needs.

## Caseloads for Dedicated SOAR Specialists

The SAMHSA SOAR TA Center estimates that a full-time dedicated specialist can complete about 25 applications in the first year, increasing to 35-40 when fully trained. A part-time SOAR specialist's caseload can be adjusted based on these figures, according to the number of hours worked.

In previous surveys, SSVF grantees reported spending an average of **17.3 hours** on each SSI/SSDI application using the SOAR model.

## SOAR Online Course Training for In-House Staff

Staff who will be using the SOAR model should complete the SOAR Online Course: Adult or Child Curriculum (depending on population served) to gain comprehensive training on how to assist Veterans and their adult family members with SSI/SSDI applications or children with SSI applications. Completion of the SOAR Online Course is required in order to be considered trained in SOAR. External trainings cannot be substituted for this requirement.

**Best Practice:** Staff who will be completing SSI/SSDI applications should complete the full SOAR Online Course. Other staff who may refer Veterans or Veteran family members for SOAR assistance can take Class 1 of the SOAR Online Course as a "SOAR 101" to better understand eligibility requirements for SSI/SSDI.

Learn about the SOAR Online Courses on the SOARWorks website and enroll.

## Requesting an SSVF Program Change to Support a Dedicated Benefits Specialist

The SSVF Program Office allows for periodic program changes throughout the year. All requests for program changes must be submitted via the GIFTS grants management system, using a standardized form and accompanied by supportive documentation. Program change requests are processed quarterly by the SSVF Program Office.

Grantees that have not included SOAR in their grant can consider requesting a change to add a new SOAR Benefits Specialist to the staff or to establish a sub-contract with a partner agency for SOAR services. This Sample SOAR Job Description may be helpful when gathering documentation to support the program change, if adding a SOAR Benefits Specialist position.

**NOTE**: All program change requests must follow the guidelines set forth in the *SSVF Companion Guide to Program Changes*. Grantees may reach out to their Regional Coordinator at any time for assistance with this process.

### Quick Facts about the SOAR Online Courses

- ✓ The training is free, self-paced, and open access.
- ✓ There are two, separate trainings for assisting with adult SSI/SSDI applications and child SSI applications.
- ✓ Each course consists of seven classes, with articles, videos, and short quizzes to test your knowledge.
- ✓ Each trainee completes a full practice SSI/SSDI application for a fictitious adult applicant, or an SSI application for a fictitious child applicant, using provided medical records, progress notes, and applicant interviews.
- ✓ Experts at the SAMHSA SOAR TA Center individually review each trainee's sample application packet and provide detailed, constructive, and positive feedback.
- ✓ Upon successful completion of the practice case, trainees receive a certificate of completion and 20 continuing education units from the National Association of Social Workers.

# Subcontracting with a Local Organization for SOAR Assistance

If grantees are not able to implement the SOAR model with in-house staff, they should partner with a local organization that has the capacity to assist Veterans and their families with SSI/SSDI applications, either through a subcontracting relationship or through a specific Memorandum of Understanding that clearly outlines referral processes and expectations. If a grantee employs an MOU only relationship (no subcontract), they must ensure that the agency that they are partnering with has the capacity and resources to support the assessed demand of SOAR referrals and that each Veteran or family member will receive SOAR services if determined eligible.

## Locating an Appropriate Subcontractor

When identifying a subcontractor to provide SOAR assistance, consider the following factors:

1. Have staff at the identified agency already successfully completed the SOAR Online Course: Adult or Child Curriculum? When was the training completed?
2. Does the identified agency have a proven record of providing SSI/SSDI assistance using SOAR for adults or children? How long have they been providing SSI/SSDI assistance with SOAR?
   a. Do they track outcomes using the SOAR Online Application Tracking (OAT) system or a similar program?
   b. How many applications have they submitted?
   c. What is their approval rate on SOAR-assisted applications they have submitted?
3. Are dedicated staff already identified and do they have the capacity to undertake full-time or part-time SOAR assistance?
4. What mechanisms are in place for the identified agency to share data on SOAR assistance?
5. Have agency staff received any military competency training or previously coordinated with the VA or Veterans Service Organizations?
6. Do the staff participate in continuing education opportunities through the SAMHSA SOAR TA Center webinars? If so, how often?

## Expectations of SOAR Subcontractors

When establishing a subcontract or Memorandum of Understanding for SOAR assistance, it is important to establish expectations in the following areas:

*Receipt of and Response to Referrals*

☐ SOAR provider trains case worker staff on SSI/SSDI eligibility and when to refer an individual for SOAR assistance.

☐ SOAR provider responds to individuals referred to them within Click here to enter text hours/days.

☐ SOAR provider meets with the referred individual within Click here to enter text days to begin assessments for SSI/SSDI eligibility.

☐ If not already provided with the referral, the SOAR provider submits requests for medical records from providers who have treated the Veteran or family member who is receiving assistance, within Click here to enter text day(s) of meeting with the individual.

☐ SOAR provider makes eligibility determination for services after interviewing the individual and reviewing medical records.

☐ Individuals who do not meet SOAR eligibility criteria will be referred to alternative income support services, such as supported employment, Vocational Rehabilitation, or local Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program (HVRP) grantees, and the grantee will be notified.

☐ For individuals who do meet SOAR eligibility criteria, the SOAR provider will begin working on the SSI/SSDI application according to the local SOAR process within Click here to enter text days/weeks.

☐ Each full-time dedicated SOAR specialist will file Click here to enter text applications annually, and each part-time dedicated SOAR specialist will file Click here to enter text initial SSI/SSDI applications annually.

☐ SOAR providers who are assisting with legal services at the SSI/SSDI appeals level will assist with Click here to enter text appeal cases annually.

☐ SOAR provider will discuss concerns with meeting the above annual targets with the grantee as soon as they arise (e.g., not receiving sufficient numbers of referrals to achieve application targets).

☐ SOAR provider maintains an approval rate for initial SSI/SSDI applications of at least Click here to enter text percent *(note: this may be set at or above the National SOAR approval rate, which was 65 percent in 2018).*

☐ Subcontractor agrees that the individual will not be charged any fees for SOAR assistance and the subcontractor will not be entitled to any portion of back pay from an SSI/SSDI award when using the SOAR model.

☐ SOAR outcomes are overall positive and individuals get income needs addressed through SOAR or referral to other services as appropriate.

☐ Individuals report to case workers that they are satisfied with the services provided by the SOAR provider.

*Coordination and Data Sharing*
☐ SOAR provider is responsive to grantee when there are individual or contract needs to address.

☐ SOAR provider participates in case coordination meetings with grantee on a weekly/monthly basis.

☐ SOAR subcontractor provides monthly/quarterly reports to grantee detailing outcomes of referrals and applications, de-identified if needed.

☐ SOAR provider enters data on SOAR assistance into the SOAR Online Application Tracking (OAT) system or HMIS, as established by the state SOAR plan, and shares SOAR outcomes with the SAMHSA SOAR TA Center annually in July.

These checklists may be used in conjunction with the *SSVF Subcontractor Monitoring Tool*, available on the VA's Homeless Veterans: Reporting and Monitoring Requirements page.

## Setting Subcontracting Rates for SOAR Assistance

While SSVF grantees have reported that each SSI/SSDI application required approximately 17 hours of assistance, the time spent on applications using the SOAR model can vary. Factors that may affect the time spent on an application include case complexity, interview time with the individual, medical examinations, and so on. A flat fee for subcontracts that assumes 20 hours of assistance works best in this type of situation:

*Sample Base Rate Calculation for SOAR Assistance*
Staff hourly rate (including benefits) x 20 hours = staff cost per SSI/SSDI application using the SOAR model

*If you are including staff training using the SOAR Online Course into the subcontract, also add:*
Staff hourly rate (including benefits) x 20 hours = cost per staff to member undertake SOAR training

**Note:** Some states may require an additional in-person SOAR Online Course Review Session or refresher training in order to use the SOAR model, which means additional training time. Check with your SOAR State Lead for requirements in your area.

## Establishing a Memorandum of Understanding with a Local Agency

When a local organization has the capacity and expertise to provide SOAR assistance to Veteran families served through SSVF without requiring financial resources from the grantee, it is important to establish a Memorandum of Understanding between the grantee and local agency that covers the above expectations. While financial resources may not be shared between the parties, a clear coordination and communication plan that is outlined in writing, helps ensure that Veterans' needs are being met.

# Appendix I: Determining Local Needs for SOAR Assistance

When determining the need for SOAR assistance for Veterans in your community, CoC, or service area, SSVF grantees can utilize this assessment *in collaboration with key community partners*, to identify the number of potentially eligible individuals in the service area, any existing SOAR resources that are being utilized to meet this need, and the additional staffing that is required to meet the SOAR assistance needs.

## Estimating the Number of Veterans who are Potentially Eligible for SSI/SSDI

1. How many Veterans, or Veteran family members, are being served by local SSVF grantees and report having severe medical or behavioral health conditions and are not currently receiving SSI/SSDI? _____

2. How many Veterans experiencing homelessness in the community are not receiving SSVF services, but meet the above criteria? *(Information may be gathered from annual Point-in-Time Count Sub-Population Report, HMIS, or other community data repository).* +_____

   **Total estimate of Veterans/family members potentially eligible for and not connected to SSI/SSDI** =_____

## Examining Existing Community Capacity and Identifying Service Gaps

3. Are organizations in your community currently using the SOAR model to assist Veterans or Veteran family members, with SSI/SSDI? ☐ Yes ☐ No

   a. If yes, how many SSI/SSDI applications do they assist with using the SOAR model each year? _____

   b. Unmet Need  *(Total above minus 3a)* _____

4. Would these organizations be able to increase their capacity to assist SSI/SSDI applicants, if needed? ☐ Yes ☐ No

   a. If yes, do they require additional financial resources from SSVF to do so? ☐ Yes ☐ No

   b. If no, how many Veterans/family members currently need SOAR assistance that cannot be met by existing organization? *(3b)* _____

If the need for SOAR assistance for Veteran families can be met by existing organizations, explore the use of a subcontracting relationship or Memorandum of Understanding between SSVF grantees and local agencies, and the financial needs required to meet the service gaps.

## Determining Staffing Needs to Address Gaps

If the demand for SOAR assistance for Veteran families cannot be addressed by existing organizations, SSVF grantees should determine how best to meet these needs by dedicating in-house staff to use the SOAR model or using cost-sharing to pool resources to support new staff, either in-house or through a new subcontractor.

To estimate the number of staff needed to address service gaps, use the following sample calculations. Note that these calculations are estimates and all staffing decisions should be made in the context of community planning and local needs. The calculations vary based on using newly-trained SOAR Benefits Specialists versus those who are experienced in using the SOAR model and/or providing SSI/SSDI assistance.

**Using newly-trained staff:** [# of potential applications]/25 applications a year per specialist = Number of newly-trained SOAR Benefits Specialists needed. *This calculation takes into account the time needed to take the SOAR Online Course and become familiar with the SSI/SSDI application process.*

**Using experienced SOAR specialists:** [# of potential applications]/35 applications a year per specialist = Number of experienced SOAR Benefits Specialists needed to address the service gaps.

# Referenced Links and Resources

## SOAR

- SOARWorks Website/SAMHSA SOAR TA Center: https://soarworks.prainc.com/
- National SOAR Outcomes Report: https://soarworks.prainc.com/article/soar-outcomes-and-impact
- SOAR Directory: https://soarworks.prainc.com/directory
- SOAR Online Course Catalog: https://soarworks.prainc.com/content/soar-online-course-catalog
- SOAR Online Courses - Additional Information: https://soarworks.prainc.com/topics/soar-online-course
- SOAR Online Application Tracking (OAT) System: https://soartrack.prainc.com
- Sample SOAR Job Description: https://soarworks.prainc.com/article/sample-soar-job-description
- SOAR and Veterans: https://soarworks.prainc.com/topics/veterans
- SOAR Resources for Children and Youth: https://soarworks.prainc.com/topics/youth

## SSA

- SSA Information for Veterans: https://www.ssa.gov/people/veterans/
- SSA's Ticket to Work Program: https://www.choosework.net/
- SSA Red Book: A Guide to Work Incentives: https://www.ssa.gov/redbook/
- SSA Field Office Locator: https://www.ssa.gov/locator

## VA

- SSVF and SOAR: https://www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf/?page=/official_guide/supportive_services
- VA Income and Benefits Calculators: https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/ssvf/docs/VA_Income_and_Benefits_Calculator_2019_Update.xlsx
- GIFTS Grant Management System Login: https://www.grantrequest.com/SID_2115?SA=AM.
- HMIS VA Data Guide FY 2019: https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/ssvf/docs/VA_Data_Guide_FY19_Final.pdf
- HMIS for SSVF Grantees Resource Page: https://www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf/index.asp?page=/official_guide/homeless_management_info_system
- Homeless Veterans: Reporting and Monitoring Requirements: https://www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf/?page=/official_guide/reporting_and_monitoring_requirements
- SSVF Companion Guide to Program Changes: https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/ssvf/docs/Companion_Guide_to_Program_Changes_FY2017_Final.pdf
- SSVF System Assessment & Improvement Toolkit: https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/ssvf/docs/SSVF_System_Assessement_and_Improvement_Toolkit_Revised.pdf

## USICH

- Key Strategies for Connecting People Experiencing Homelessness to SSI/SSDI: https://www.usich.gov/tools-for-action/key-strategies-for-connecting-people-experiencing-homelessness-to-ssi-ssdi

## HUD

- FY 2020 HMIS Data Standards Manual (released May 2019): https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/HMIS-Data-Standards-Manual.pdf
- HUD Coordinated Entry Requirements and Checklist of Essential Elements: https://www.hudexchange.info/news/hud-publishes-coordinated-entry-requirements-and-checklist-of-essential-elements/