Supportive Services for Veteran Families

SOAR Integration Toolkit

June 2017

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

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Contents

SOAR-SSVF Integration Toolkit

Purpose of the SOAR-SSVF Integration Toolkit

Connecting Veterans with Social Security Administration (SSA) disability benefits is a critical step to increasing income stability for Veterans and their families, particularly for those Veterans whose work activity is limited by 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.

SOAR is a federal interagency project, and the SOAR Technical Assistance Center is funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). SOAR assistance is designed to increase access to Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) for eligible adults who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and who have a 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 and shorten the time it takes for individuals to receive them.

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. 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 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

In 2015, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) released an amendment to *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*, which reports that half of Veterans experiencing homelessness have severe mental illness and over half have other health issues.[1] In addition, research shows that Veterans experience high rates of traumatic brain injury (TBI), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and sexual trauma, which contribute to difficulty in maintaining employment and housing.

The SSVF FY 2015 Annual Report echoes these results and reports that 56 percent of Veterans served in FY 2015 had a disabling condition, twice the disability rate of the total U.S. Veteran population (28 percent).[2] For individuals with disabling conditions, exploring SSI/SSDI eligibility is a key component of housing-focused supportive services.

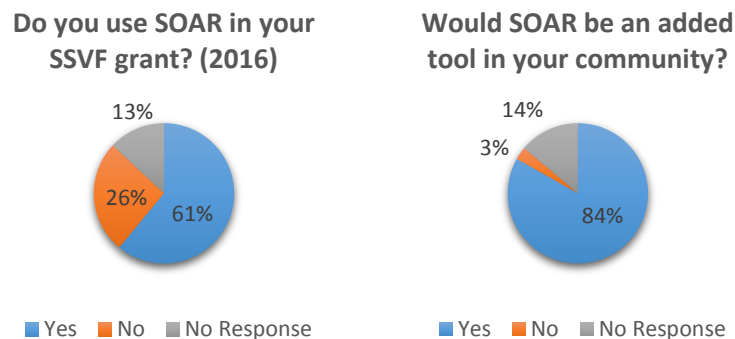[1] U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (2015). *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness* As Amended in 2015. Retrieved from: https://www.usich.gov/opening-doors

[2] U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2016). Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF): FY 2015 Annual Report. Retrieved from: https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/ssvf/docs/SSVF_FY2015_Annual_Report_FINAL_508rev.pdf

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.

In a December 2016 survey, **more than 60 percent of SSVF grantees reported using the SOAR model to assist Veteran families**, either in-house directly through SSVF staff, through non-SSVF-funded positions, or by referring Veterans to community SOAR partners. However, **84 percent** of grantees reported that the SOAR model would be an added tool in their communities.

Do you use SOAR in your SSVF grant? (2016)

13%

26%

61%

■ Yes ■ No ■ No Response

Would SOAR be an added tool in your community?

14%

3%

84%

■ Yes ■ No ■ No Response
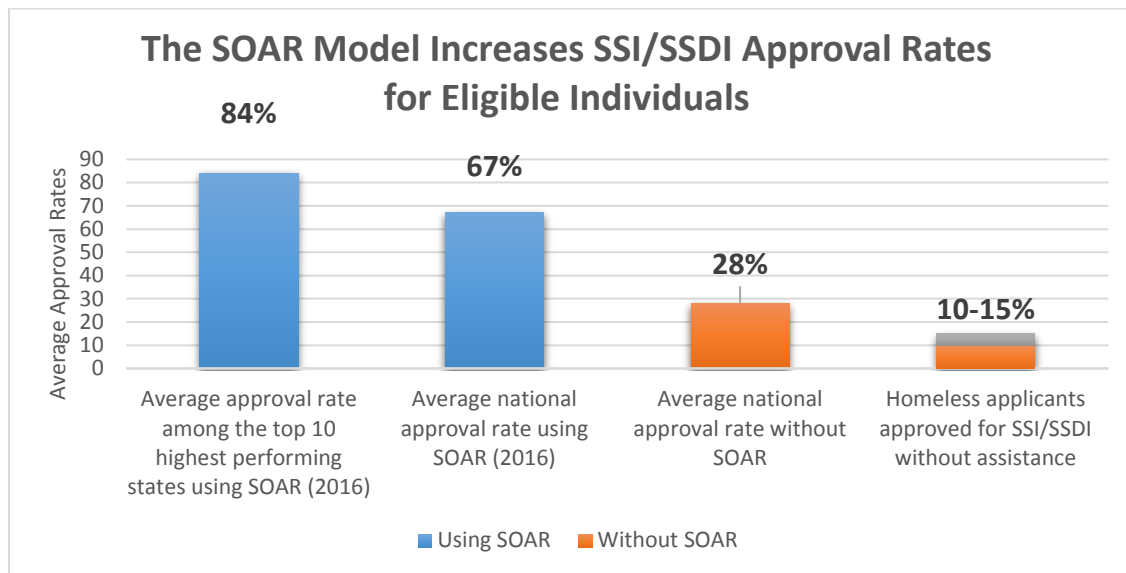
This guide provides tools to:

- ✓ Identify and describe how Veterans with disabling conditions can benefit from SSI/SSDI
- ✓ 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 homeless or at-risk adults to increase access to SSI and SSDI. Eligible clients include adults who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness and have a mental illness, medical impairment, or a co-occurring substance use disorder.

- Since SOAR began in 2006, SOAR-trained case managers have assisted more than **36,112 people** who were experiencing or at risk of homelessness in obtaining SSI or SSDI benefits. Of these, 31,356 were approved for SSI/SSDI upon **initial** application. An additional 4,756 persons whose applications were denied initially were approved on reconsideration or appeal.
- In 2016, SOAR-trained providers across the country maintained an average approval rate of **67 percent** for initial applications in an average of **101 days** from application date to decision.[3] The top 10 highest-performing states using SOAR have served over 9,400 individuals and have an average approval rate of **84 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- to 15-percent approval rate, and all applicants regardless of housing status have a 28 percent average approval rate on initial applications. Using the SOAR critical components to assist eligible adults in applying for SSI/SSDI is integral to successful and expedient applications.

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[3] SAMHSA SOAR TA CENTER (2017). "2016 SOAR Outcomes."
https://soarworks.prainc.com/sites/soarworks.prainc.com/files/2016%20Outcomes-Final-508.pdf

The SOAR Model Increases SSI/SSDI Approval Rates for Eligible Individuals

Individuals who are experiencing homelessness face numerous barriers when applying for Social Security disability benefits, and high rates of denial typically result from SSA's inability to contact the individual, missed appointments, and, more generally, a lack of adequate documentation.

Case managers implement the SOAR model by:

- Conducting outreach to identify individuals who are eligible for SSI/SSDI
- Gathering medical records 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 mental 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:
  - Each state contracts with an agency that 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 community plans to end homelessness and address challenges as they arise
- Encouraging open communication, data sharing, and case coordination across all service providers who serve individuals experiencing homelessness

Connecting with State and Local SOAR Efforts

The SOAR model is used in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, and technical assistance is available for U.S. territories interested in implementing the SOAR model. Many local areas also have active SOAR Steering Committees, which guide implementation of the model, and SOAR Provider Workgroups, which support case managers who use SOAR. Use the SOAR State Contact Directory to connect with local and state SOAR leaders in your area.

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The SAMHSA SOAR Technical Assistance Center

The SOAR Technical Assistance (TA) Center is funded by SAMHSA and operated by Policy Research Associates, Inc. Established in 2009, the SOAR TA Center works with all 50 states and the District of Columbia to develop and refine action plans for implementing and expanding SOAR programs, at no cost to communities. TA is also available for U.S. territories that are interested in the SOAR model.

The SOAR TA Center provides a three-step approach to SOAR implementation:

1. Facilitate strategic planning by bringing together local stakeholders to collaborate and agree upon a SOAR process and develop an action plan for implementation.
2. Train community leaders through the SOAR Leadership Academy to support SOAR-trained case managers and coordinate local SOAR programs.
3. Provide individualized technical assistance to support action plan implementation, program sustainability, and quality review procedures.

SOAR Online Application Tracking System

The SOAR TA Center administers the Online Application Tracking (OAT) system, which is a free, web-based, HIPAA-compliant tracking system for data indicators related to SSI/SSDI applications filed using the SOAR model.

The OAT system is different from a community Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) in that it only tracks outcomes related to SSI/SSDI applications. Data for each Veteran 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

Additional Resources from the SOAR TA Center

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

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 TA needs, at both the local and national levels. Grantees can analyze data indicators in OAT to identify training needs and barriers to implementation , as well as to highlight and celebrate local progress in benefits acquisition. Each July, the SOAR TA Center publishes outcomes on SSI/SSDI applications that use the SOAR model. View the 2016 National SOAR Outcomes Report.

Getting Started: Veteran 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).

VA Disability Benefits

The Veterans Benefits Administration oversees 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 individuals who are blind, disabled, or over age 65, and who have limited income and resources.[4]
- **Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI)** provides benefits to individuals 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 accompanies these benefits for eligible individuals.

> ### SSA Expedited Processing for Veterans
>
> Veterans may qualify for SSA programs that will expedite their disability decisions:
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> *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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[4] 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 if they are not eligible for SSI.

Definition of Disability for SSI/SSDI

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 for a VA benefit decision.

For SSI/SSDI, an individual needs to show:

1. Evidence of a physical or mental health condition that results in functional impairments that limit his or her ability to work at a substantial gainful level ($1,170/month in 2017)[5]
2. Evidence that the disabling condition has lasted, or is expected to last, for 12 months or to end in death.

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

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, 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 on whether they are approved for SSI or for SSDI.

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 Paul's 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 (2017 rates)	$735
Counted Income	*- $380*
Monthly SSI Amount	= $355
Total Monthly Income (VA + SSI benefit amounts)	$755

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.

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

SSDI

In contrast, 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 that income limitations do not impede rapid access to permanent housing:

- 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.
- SSA looks at the *type* and *amount* of work completed to see if an individual can maintain "substantial gainful activity (SGA)," ($1,170/month in 2017), or if they have difficulties in maintaining this level of work activity due to disabling conditions.

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 the example on the following page, 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 Plan 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 (2017 rates)	$735
Subtract Counted Income	- $282.50
Monthly SSI Amount	= $452.50
Total Monthly Income (VA + SSI Benefit Amounts)	**$1252.50**

SSDI

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

- *Trial Work Period (TWP):* Nine months in a rolling five-year period, during which a person can earn 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 three-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 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 this reduces earnings to 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 a disabling condition.

- 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 they met 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.

SOAR and the Federal Criteria and Benchmarks for Ending Veteran 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 non-recurring.[6]

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:

Criterion 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, prioritize them for services, and begin SOAR assistance.

Criterion 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 can quickly be 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.

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

- Quickly connect Veterans who choose SITH 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 do not choose SITH and instead utilize bridge housing, connect them with a SOAR specialist who can expedite the application process as they are placed in permanent housing.

Criterion 4: The community has capacity to assist Veterans to swiftly move into permanent housing.

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

Criterion 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 individuals receive rapid referrals to SOAR Benefits Specialists.

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

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[6] Guidance from USICH on the Criteria and Benchmarks is available here:
https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Vet_Criteria_Benchmarks_V3_February2017.pdf

Assessing and Prioritizing Veterans for SOAR Assistance

Assessment for income support needs and referral to appropriate mainstream resources are 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 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.
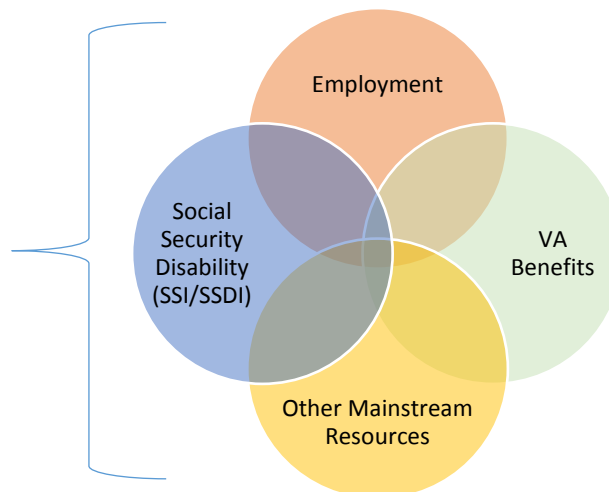
The goal is to find the **individualized, appropriate combination of income supports** that each Veteran family needs for permanent housing and pursue those opportunities while concurrently focusing on identifying a permanent housing unit or resource for the Veteran. **However, income should never be a reason to screen a Veteran away from SSVF services.**

Grantee Level Assessments: Key SSI/SSDI Eligibility Indicators

As SSVF case managers complete housing-focused needs assessments with Veteran families, familiarity with the SSI/SSDI eligibility criteria can help them rapidly identify individuals who are potentially eligible for SOAR assistance and referral to appropriate resources.

The following characteristics represent key eligibility criteria for 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 ($1,170/month in 2017).
2. The illnesses or conditions have lasted or are expected to last for at least 12 months, or to 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:
   o Understand, remember, or apply information (memory, following instructions, solving problems, etc.)
   o Interact with others (getting along with others, anger, avoidance, etc.)
   o Concentrate, persist, or maintain pace (as these relate to the ability to complete tasks)
   o Adapt or manage oneself (hygiene, responding to change, setting realistic goals, etc.)

Grantee Tips for Identifying Eligible Veterans

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 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 Veterans for SOAR may begin to scale up to community-level coordination, identification, and prioritization of Veterans who are eligible for SSI/SSDI. Continuums of Care (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 learn whether these tools are in use in your community and to determine whether 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
> 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 and communicates with SSA and DDS

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 Veterans for SOAR assistance.

Coordinated Entry Systems

HUD requires all CoCs to establish and operate a coordinated or centralized assessment system to increase the efficiency and ensure easy and fair access to resources for individuals experiencing homelessness. A critical aspect of coordinated entry systems is assessing an individual's 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 performed concurrently with housing-related needs assessments, so that individuals experiencing homelessness can rapidly placed into housing and referred to appropriate supportive services.

Common Assessment Tools

Common Assessment Tools are a required element of coordinated entry. Already 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 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 observation 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

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 prioritize SOAR assistance, we recommend prioritizing those who report serious medical or mental health conditions, and who rank highest on the housing prioritization list.

Homeless Management Information System

HMIS is a locally managed data system maintained by CoCs to record and analyze client, service, and housing data for individuals and families who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. SSVF 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 individuals served by SSVF, analyzing the following data indicators may 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 4.21)

Individuals meeting these criteria should be prioritized for an SSI/SSDI assessment by a SOAR provider. Additional information on VA data indicators is located in the VA Data Guide: Data Collection and Reporting Guidance for SSVF Grantees. Additional information about HMIS universal data standards can be found in the 2014 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 Veterans who are experiencing homelessness. 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 each Veteran. Integrating elements such as Common Assessment scores or high medical acuity indicators into the master list facilitates prioritization 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, during or after housing process 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 of Veterans experiencing homelessness in their community are being met (e.g., housing and income support assistance through SOAR). Progress towards helping Veteran families achieve income and housing stability should be reviewed at each meeting. Grantees should work to arrange data-sharing agreements with partners to ensure open communication.

SOAR and Housing First

SSVF is fully committed to Housing First and to ensuring that no unnecessary barriers, including lack of income, inhibit grantee efforts to rapidly house homeless Veterans. The pursuit of cash benefits or other income supports is 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 concurrently with or after the immediate housing crisis has been resolved.

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 homelessness. When assessing gaps in community services for Veterans, 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 reports, HMIS, or other community data repositories).*
- 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?
- 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 to 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 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 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 limitations these may cause in maintaining employment and housing. Other important partners, such as SSA/DDS representatives and local SOAR leaders, help address challenges as they arise and facilitate open communication. Key partners include:

- Local and State SSA and DDS representatives
- Hospitals and clinics (both VA and non-VA)
- Street outreach teams
- Jail and prison social work and medical teams
- Housing providers
- Supported employment and vocational rehabilitation programs
- State and local SOAR leaders, and the National SOAR TA Center liaison

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 in applying for SSI/SSDI. Grantees can use the free SOAR Online Course for staff training and the SSVF program change process to integrate dedicated benefits specialists into staff teams. In order to be considered SOAR-trained, an SSVF grantee or subcontractor **must** complete the full online training curriculum through the SAMHSA SOAR TA Center. Alternative trainings cannot be substituted. .

Dedicated Benefits Specialists in SSVF Programs

Grantees should learn what SOAR resources currently exist in the communities they serve. For example, the local SOAR lead organization may have the capacity to handle all SOAR applications if SSVF could provide financial assistance 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.

Percentage of SSVF Grantees with an SSVF-funded Benefits Specialist Position

- Yes
- No
- Other
- No Response

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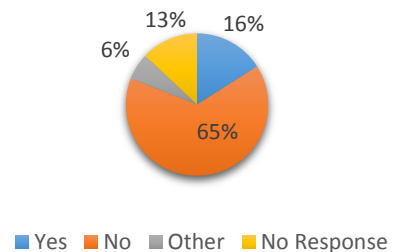
Cost-Sharing between Grantees to Support SOAR Benefits Specialists

After analyzing need and organizational capacity, multiple SSVF grantees in a service area may decide to pool their resources to create one or more Benefits Specialist positions, rather than a single grantee funding all SOAR assistance. In this model, grantees could split the costs evenly, 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 among 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

After agreeing on a cost-sharing option, the grantees will decide if the staffing will be split among 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 2016, 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 to gain comprehensive training on how to assist Veterans and their families with SSI/SSDI applications. Completion of the 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 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 Course on the SOARWorks website and enroll.

Percentage of Grantees with Staff Who Have Passed the SOAR Online Course (2016)

14%
43%
44%

■ Yes ■ No ■ Missing/No Response
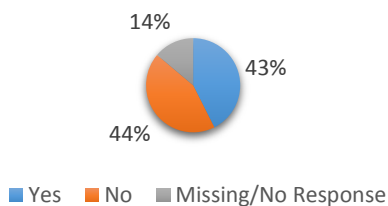
Quick Facts about the SOAR Online Course

✓ The training is free, self paced, and open access.
✓ The course consists of seven classes, with articles, videos, and short quizzes to test your knowledge.
✓ Each trainee completes a full practice SSI/SSDI application on a fictitious applicant, using provided medical records, progress notes, and client interviews.
✓ Experts at the SOAR TA Center individually review each trainee's sample SSI/SSDI application packet and provide detailed, 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.

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 subcontract 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.

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 with SSI/SSDI applications, either through a subcontracting relationship or through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that clearly outlines referral processes and expectations. If a grantee employs an MOU-only relationship (no subcontract), they must ensure that the agency they are partnering with has the capacity and resources to support the assessed demand of SOAR referrals and that each Veteran 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? When was the training completed?
2. Does the identified agency have a proven record of providing SSI/SSDI assistance using SOAR? How long have they been providing SSI/SSDI assistance with SOAR?
    a. Do they track outcomes using the SOAR Online Application Tracking system or a similar program?
    b. How many applications have they submitted?
    c. What is their approval rate on SSI/SSDI 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 MOU for SOAR assistance, it is important to establish expectations in the following areas:

Receipt of and Response to Referrals

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

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

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

☐ If medical records are not already provided with the referral, the SOAR provider submits requests to providers who have treated the Veteran. These requests are made within Click here to enter text day(s) of meeting with the client.

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

☐ Clients 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 organization will be notified.

☐ For clients who 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 with the grantee any concerns about meeting the above annual targets (e.g., not receiving sufficient numbers of referrals to achieve application targets) as soon as they arise.

☐ 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 67 percent in 2016).*

☐ Subcontractor agrees that the client 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 clients get income needs addressed through SOAR or referral to other services as appropriate.

☐ Clients report to case managers 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 client 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 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 reported in 2016 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 client, and medical examinations. 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 in the subcontract, also add:

Staff hourly rate (including benefits) x 20 hours = cost per staff member to undertake SOAR training

Note: Some states may require additional in-person SOAR Fundamentals or refresher trainings in order to use the SOAR model. 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 Veterans served through SSVF without requiring financial resources from the grantee, it is important to establish an MOU 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 a given 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, any existing SOAR resources that are being utilized, 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 reports, HMIS, or other community data repositories).*   +_____

    Total estimate of Veterans 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 with SSI/SSDI?   ☐ Yes   No

    a. If yes, how many SSI/SSDI applications do they assist Veterans with using the SOAR model each year?
    b. Unmet Need (Total above minus 3a number of Vet applications organizations could complete)   _____

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 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 MOU 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 providing SSI/SSDI assistance.

Using newly-trained staff: [# of potential applications]/25 applications a year per case manager = 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 case managers: [# of potential applications]/35 applications a year per case manager = Number of experienced SOAR Benefits Specialists needed.

SOAR

- SOARWorks Website/SAMHSA SOAR TA Center: https://soarworks.prainc.com/
- SOAR 2016 National SOAR Outcomes Report: https://soarworks.prainc.com/article/2016-national-soar-outcomes.
- SOAR Directory: https://soarworks.prainc.com/directory
- SOAR Online Course Registration: https://soarworks.prainc.com/course/ssissdi-outreach-access-and-recovery-soar-online-training
- SOAR Online Course - 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/sites/soarworks.prainc.com/files/SOAR_sample_job_description.docx.
- SOAR and Veterans: https://soarworks.prainc.com/topics/veterans

SSA

- SSA Information for Veterans: https://www.ssa.gov/people/veterans/
- SSA's Ticket to Work Program: https://www.choosework.net/

VA

- SSVF and SOAR: https://www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf/?page=/official_guide/supportive_services
- GIFTS Grant Management System Login: https://www.grantrequest.com/SID_2115?SA=AM.
- HMIS VA Data Guide FY 2017: https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/ssvf/docs/VA_Data_Guide_FY17.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

- 2014 HMIS Data Standards Manual (released August 2016): https://www.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/