

Benefits Planning Assistance & Outreach Program (BPAO)

Persons with disabilities continue to experience underemployment and unemployment at an unacceptable rate. Beneath the surface of this issue there are complex federal-welfare and long-term disability programs administered by the Social Security Administration (SSA). While intended to provide basic income and health care for persons with disabilities, they have evolved as a major obstacle to employment and subsequent economic progress. Many beneficiaries do not understand the interactions of earned income through employment and its impact on SSA cash benefits and health care. As a result, beneficiaries may avoid work, or be discouraged from pursuing their maximum earning potential.

The Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act (TWWIA) represents the culmination of efforts by and on behalf of SSA to improve the employment of persons with disabilities through coordinated networks of private and public providers which promote confidentiality, choice, and outcomes. This initiative includes the development and delivery of local benefits counseling programs known as Benefits Planning Assistance & Outreach (BPAO). The BPAO Providers operate under cooperative agreements with SSA, and are provided certification training and ongoing technical assistance to ensure quality service to beneficiaries and related parties. For further information: <http://www.ssa.gov/work/Beneficiaries/activity.html#Pennsylvania>

AHEDD is a private, non-profit agency specializing in the employment of persons with disabilities. Established in 1977 with a mission is to serve the community as a catalyst in the employment and development of persons with a disability, AHEDD provides community employment services through a network throughout Pennsylvania and Delaware. As a BPAO Provider, AHEDD conducts outreach throughout designated communities (i.e. western PA) and provide benefits planning and counseling to SSI and/or SSDI beneficiaries ages 14-64. Using a regional network of Benefits Specialists, AHEDD collaborates with public and private organizations, including the PA Department of Welfare, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and other Employment Networks, SSA, and schools to promote and facilitate benefits planning and counseling for beneficiaries.

The service model is accessible, individualized, and user-friendly, featuring a variety of community locations to maximize access by beneficiaries. At the completion of the counseling session, beneficiaries receive an individualized report highlighting key elements, earnings scenarios, applicable work incentives, and potential areas for concern. It is our contention that this delivery of SSA benefits counseling will provide a foundation by which beneficiaries will develop a proactive relationship with SSA, and be encouraged to seek and maintain greater levels of earned income towards increased economic self-sufficiency.

For further information, contact John Miller, Project Director, at (717) 763-0968, ext 118, or john.miller@ahedd.org