

## Peer Support Workers and Peer-Run Organizations: A Beneficial Resource for Implementing SOAR

SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) helps states and communities promote wellness and recovery through increased access to Social Security disability benefits for eligible 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. Funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the SAMHSA SOAR Technical Assistance (TA) Center develops and provides systems planning, training, and technical assistance to support the implementation of SOAR nationwide.

### Introduction

Increasingly, people with lived experience are being called upon to provide services for people with behavioral health conditions. People with common life experiences have a unique capacity to help each other as they share a deep understanding of their shared experiences, which may not exist in other relationships. Peer-operated services are now recognized nationally and internationally and numerous studies demonstrate that peer-operated services show positive recovery-based outcomes for people with behavioral health disorders.\*

Peer-operated services generate hope, open new doors, and increase people's sense of well-being. In addition, peers are very useful in helping people navigate the processes involved with accessing life-saving public benefits and services.†

### SOAR

SOAR is a national program that seeks to expedite access to Social Security Administration (SSA) disability benefits (Supplemental Security Income [SSI] and Social Security Disability Insurance [SSDI]) for eligible adults who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness and who have a serious mental illness, medical impairment, and/or a co-occurring substance use disorder. Nationally, only about 28 percent of all individuals who apply for SSA disability benefits are approved on initial application, and appeals take an average of 605 days to complete.‡§ However, the approval rate on initial SOAR applications averages 65 percent in an average of 96 days (from date of application submission to date of decision).¶ The SOAR model involves outreach, engagement, relationship-building, and the identification of each individual's needs, hopes, and dreams—attributes at the centerpiece of peer services.

*"...individuals who have experienced homelessness are able to provide a level of empathy that is otherwise missing and by using the SOAR model we are able to get great outcomes for our clients."  
- Joshua Black, Program Manager, Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (PATH) Program, Capital Recovery Center, Olympia, Washington*

\* Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Consumer-Operated Services: How to Use the Evidence-Based Practices KITS*, HHS Pub. No. SMA-11-4633, Rockville, MD: Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011, <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Consumer-Operated-Services-Evidence-Based-Practices-EBP-KIT/SMA11-4633>.

† Ibid.

‡ Social Security Administration, *SSI Annual Statistical Report, 2016*, SSA Pub. No. 13-11827. Washington, DC: SSA, November 2017, [https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/statcomps/ssi\\_asr/2016/ssi\\_asr16.pdf](https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/statcomps/ssi_asr/2016/ssi_asr16.pdf).

§ Social Security Administration, "Hearing Office Average Processing Time Ranking Report FY 2017 (For Reporting Purposes: 10/01/2016 through 09/29/2017)," [https://www.ssa.gov/appeals/DataSets/archive/05\\_FY2017/05\\_August\\_Average\\_Processing\\_Time\\_Report.html](https://www.ssa.gov/appeals/DataSets/archive/05_FY2017/05_August_Average_Processing_Time_Report.html).

¶ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery Technical Assistance Center, *2017 National SOAR Outcomes* (Delmar, NY: SAMHSA SOAR TA Center), 2018, <https://soarworks.prairc.com/article/soar-outcomes-and-impact>.

SOAR providers (trained through the SOAR Online Course) work directly with individuals to assist them with the SSI/SSDI application process. SOAR providers meet with the applicant on a regular basis, complete required SSA forms, complete a Medical Summary Report, attend appointments, and communicate with SSA and Disability Determination Services (DDS) on the applicant's behalf. In addition, upon the completion of SOAR cases, SOAR providers enter outcome data into the SAMHSA SOAR TA Center's Online Application Tracking (OAT) program.\*

## Peer-Operated Services

Peer-operated services, often referred to as consumer-operated services, peer support programs, or peer services, are programs that emphasize self-help and are operated by mental health consumers.† The services offered vary considerably, but most often include drop-in programs, peer counseling, homeless outreach, linkage to traditional services or benefit programs, and other recovery supports, such as supported housing and employment.‡

It is important to note that peer-operated services are more than mental health services delivered by peers. Peers offer a different approach to helping than traditional treatment services. This difference comes from inherent values, one of which is the idea of "mutual benefit"—the idea that the person providing the support receives just as much benefit as the person receiving the service. Founded in the philosophy used in traditional 12-step programs, those in recovery are able to find meaning and value in the fact that they are able to help those with whom they share common experiences.§

## The Case for Having Peers Complete SOAR Applications

Peers have a unique ability to engage with individuals and help people share information about how their conditions affect their ability to function, treatment sources, and collateral sources of evidence. Peers are a natural fit to help people with the SOAR application process.

\* "SOAR Online Application Tracking (OAT) System," SAMHSA SOAR TA Center, <https://soartrack.prainc.com/login.php>.

† SAMHSA, *Consumer-Operated Services: How to Use the Evidence-Based Practices KITS*.

‡ Ibid.

§ Ibid.

¶ A. S. Daniels, T. P. Tunner, S. Bergeson, P. Ashenden, L. Fricks, and I. Powell, *The Pillars of Peer Support Services Summit IV Establishing Standards for Excellence*, 2013, <http://www.pillarsofpeersupport.org/POPS2012.pdf>.

There are a number of different places across the country where peers are playing an active role in SOAR activities.

- **Washington:** Capital Recovery Center is a peer-run mental health agency that employs two and a half full-time employees, including one SOAR volunteer, who perform a number of supportive tasks for people experiencing homelessness.
- **Michigan:** There are a number of agencies in Michigan that have engaged peers to complete SOAR applications with great results. For example, Allegan County Community Mental Health has an approval rate of 90 percent and Genesee Health System has received over 60 approvals!

A helpful tool for gaining support for the use of peers in the completion of SSI/SSDI applications is [The Value of Peer Support](#), developed by SAMHSA's BRSS TACS TA Center. This tool provides up-to-date information about the immense value of peers being integrated across multiple service settings. Additionally, the SAMHSA SOAR TA Center is a great place to begin your efforts to include more peers into your SOAR service delivery system. You are encouraged to reach out to your [SOAR TA Center Liaison](#) to begin this process.

## Peer Specialist Certification and SOAR

Many states offer Peer Specialist certification in an effort to ensure that all peers providing services are adequately trained. This also allows their services to be reimbursed by various funding sources, specifically Medicaid. As with other professional certifications there is training, testing, and continuing education credits that must be obtained for individuals to retain their certification.¶

In an effort to ensure that more Peer Specialists are involved in delivering SOAR services, some states have developed infrastructure that solidifies the relationship between SOAR and the state's Peer Specialist program.

For example, the State of Louisiana’s Peer Specialist program allows SOAR training to count towards an individual’s Peer Specialist continuing education requirements.\*

## Involving Peers in Planning

In line with the idea that there should be “nothing about us, without us,” a long-used statement in the mental health consumer movement, state and local SOAR Steering Committees should include members who have lived experience with recovery from behavioral health conditions, homelessness, and unemployment. Representation from person(s) who access or have accessed public benefits, particularly SSA benefits, would also be very beneficial. In addition to being able to provide valuable insight into the planning and implementation of SOAR initiatives, these individuals may be employed by or have affiliations with peer-run organizations, providing opportunities for collaboration.

Connecting with local or statewide consumer-run organizations is a great place to start. The National Empowerment Center has a [state-based directory](#) with contact information.

*“I love working with people who are just like me, helping support their efforts to get benefits so that they can go on and live lives in recovery.”*  
- Joann McCann, Certified Peer Support Specialist, Genesee Health System, Flint, Michigan

## Next Steps

As SOAR communities look toward sustaining and expanding services to ensure a higher number of eligible people experiencing homelessness have access to SSI/SSDI, communities are encouraged to take a serious look at including peers in the infrastructure. For more information about how to modify existing state processes for peer training and service delivery and how to integrate these activities with your SOAR efforts, please contact the SAMHSA SOAR TA Center at [soar@prainc.com](mailto:soar@prainc.com).

## Resources

[SAMHSA’s SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery Technical Assistance \(SOAR TA\) Center](#)

SAMHSA’s SOAR program increases access to Social Security disability benefits for eligible 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.

[International Association of Peer Supporters \(iNAPS\)](#)

An international membership organization that shares ideas and innovations.

[MHA National Certified Peer Specialist Certification](#)

The MHA National Certified Peer Specialist (MHA NCPS) certification recognizes peers with the lived experience, training, and job experience to create a career in peer support.

[SAMHSA BRSS TACS](#)

Bringing Recovery Supports to Scale Technical Assistance Center Strategy (BRSS TACS) advances effective recovery supports and services for people with mental or substance use disorders and their families.

[Value of Peers—2017](#)

A presentation developed to share information and describe how peer supports advance recovery and add value to behavioral health systems.

## Disclaimer

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## Recommended Citation

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery Technical Assistance Center. (2018, September). *Peer Support Workers and Peer-Run Organizations: A Beneficial Resource for Implementing SOARs*. Retrieved from <https://soarworks.prainc.com/topics/peer-supports>.

\* Nancy Roach Hughes to All Peer Support Specialists Regarding Continuing Education/SOAR Training, 2016, [https://soarworks.prainc.com/sites/soarworks.prainc.com/files/LA\\_SOAR\\_PeerSpecialistMemo.docx](https://soarworks.prainc.com/sites/soarworks.prainc.com/files/LA_SOAR_PeerSpecialistMemo.docx).

## Potential Funding Sources to Integrate Peer Support Workers into Your SOAR Program



### *Federal and State Government Funding*

#### SAMHSA

**Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (PATH)** funds provide outreach and supportive services for adults with serious mental illness or substance use disorders who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. PATH funds support dedicated SOAR benefit specialists, SOAR training, and statewide leadership and coordination in many states. The PATH program highly values the active participation of peers and consumers and many programs across the country are already employing peers. Each state has a State PATH Contact, who is often also the SOAR State Team Lead. State provider contacts are available on the [SAMHSA website](#).

**Cooperative Agreements to Benefit Homeless Individuals (CABHI)** funds dedicated SOAR benefits specialists and access to mainstream benefits programs. [CABHI](#) also encourages the use of peers and a number of CABHI funded programs integrate the use of peers into their chosen service delivery process.

**Community Mental Health Services Block Grant (MHBG)** funds priority treatment and support services not covered by Medicaid, Medicare, or private insurance for low-income individuals that demonstrate success in improving outcomes and/or supporting recovery.

#### Other Federal Funding

**The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)** is a flexible program that provides communities with resources to address unique community development needs and distributes annual grants on a formula basis to local governments and states. SOAR programs have used these funds to support dedicated benefits specialists.

The **Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) grant** provided by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs promotes housing stability for low-income Veterans. Funds may be used to increase access to SSI/SSDI and to support dedicated SOAR benefits specialists. Two important toolkits that SSVF providers should access and reference include the [SSVF SOAR Integration Toolkit](#) and the [Peer Specialist Toolkit: Implementing Peer Support Services in VHA](#).

**AmeriCorps** is a network of [national service programs](#) that each take a different approach to improving lives and fostering civic engagement. Members commit their time to address critical community needs.

Many AmeriCorps programs employ peers who can provide a unique and important perspective. AmeriCorps State and VISTA programs can address different community needs, as described below. More information about AmeriCorps and SOAR collaborations can be found on the [SOAR website](#).

*AmeriCorps State members* can provide direct outreach, engagement, and assistance with SSI/SSDI applications using the SOAR process. State and community organizations can apply for a grant to support AmeriCorps State members through their governor-appointed State Service Commission.

*AmeriCorps VISTA members* can identify potential SOAR collaborations, organize local SOAR planning meetings, fundraise for dedicated SOAR staff, collect data, and coordinate future trainings. State and community organizations can apply to sponsor an AmeriCorps VISTA member through their State Corporation for National and Community Service Office.

#### State or County General Assistance (GA) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Incentives

For individuals with severe disabilities who cannot work, transitioning from GA or TANF to SSI/SSDI provides them with greater benefits. The state also saves funds when individuals transition to federal benefits. Programs in California, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania have documented savings to state

programs and leveraged funding for SOAR programs. Connecting the state GA or TANF departments with the department of behavioral health or state Medicaid agency will be important to help identify ways that these programs can utilize peer support workers.



#### *State or Local Plans to End Homelessness*

These plans have funded SOAR leadership, coordination, and dedicated benefits specialists. It is important to encourage peer participation in the state and local planning groups as well as including peer support workers as a specific population to target for funding development and/or training.



#### *Foundation and Other Private Funding*

National and local companies and foundations fund SOAR coordination, training, and dedicated SOAR benefits specialists. These funding requests can be targeted for peer specialist positions. The SAMHSA SOAR TA Center can assist with individualized foundation funding reports. Additional funding resources are also available on the [SOAR website](#).



#### *Hospital Collaborations*

Hospitals can benefit from SOAR collaborations by recouping payments for previously uncompensated care when individuals approved for SSI obtain Medicaid. Peer supports are a Medicaid billable service in many states. Hospitals will not only be able to recoup other uncompensated care, but also bill for services provided 90 days prior to the protective filing date, including the services provided by the peer support worker.



#### *Criminal Justice System Collaborations*

SOAR programs collaborate with jails and prisons through in-reach initiatives, re-entry planning, and training of corrections staff to complete SSI/SSDI applications. These efforts reduce recidivism and prevent incarceration through jail diversion, which in turn saves money for states and communities. Forensic peer specialists are taking a greater role in criminal justice settings.