

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, the National Training and Data Center (NTDC) at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) has trained and certified more than 3,200 professionals to provide individualized work incentives counseling services to beneficiaries seeking to pursue their career goals and increase their financial independence. These highly skilled Community Work Incentive Counselors (CWICs) and Community Partner Work Incentive Counselors (CPWICs) have met the needs of more than 900,000 beneficiaries in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and five U.S. territories. The CWICs and CPWICs assist beneficiaries to make employment and financial decisions, including:

1. Developing immediate and long-term financial goals.
2. Understanding the effect of increased earnings on disability benefit eligibility status and amount.
3. Making decisions related to the use of public and private health care coverage options.
4. Obtaining employment services from Employment Networks (ENs), state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies, or other community organizations.
5. Accessing and benefiting from community resources such as credit repair services, tax preparation assistance, financial education services, and other related supports.
6. Using Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) accounts, Individual Development Accounts (IDAs), and other savings vehicles to achieve savings and asset acquisition goals.

The Structure of the National Training Curriculum

The National Training Curriculum is the foundation of all NTDC training and certification activities. We base our training activities and curriculum content on a comprehensive set of competencies that individuals must acquire to achieve the work incentives counselor certification necessary to provide work incentives planning and assistance services to Social Security beneficiaries. We have grouped the Social Security-approved

competencies into seven distinct competency areas. We identify and briefly describe these training modules below.

Major Work Incentives Counseling Competency Areas

1. Supporting Increased Employment and Financial Independence Outcomes for Social Security Disability Beneficiaries
2. Partnering with Community Agencies and Conducting Community Outreach
3. Understanding Social Security Disability Benefits and Associated Work Incentives
4. Healthcare Planning and Counseling
5. Understanding Other Federal Benefits and Associated Work Incentives
6. Providing Effective WIPA Services
7. WIPA Standards and Quality Considerations for CWICs

Major Competency Areas

Competency Area 1: Supporting Increased Employment and Financial Independence Outcomes for Social Security Disability Beneficiaries

Module 1 opens with a detailed description of WIPA services and the CWIC's role in promoting employment and financial independence for Social Security beneficiaries. We provide an overview of Social Security's recent efforts to promote employment and increase financial independence for disability beneficiaries, including the Ticket to Work and Self-Sufficiency Program (TtW), Social Security/VR Reimbursement program, WIPA program, and Protection and Advocacy for Beneficiaries of Social Security (PABSS) program. This module also addresses eligibility criteria, referral procedures, and services available from various entities such as state VR agencies, American Job Centers administered by state Workforce agencies, and other employment service and support programs.

Competency Area 2: Partnering with Community Agencies and Conducting Community Outreach

Module 2 focuses on providing effective outreach to Social Security beneficiaries as well as outreach activities directed toward community agencies, stakeholder groups, and partner agencies. We describe how WIPA projects work collaboratively with the Ticket Program Manager

(TPM) and the TtW Help Line to conduct outreach to Social Security disability beneficiaries who are eligible for the TtW program. Finally, the module addresses strategies CWICs can use to work collaboratively with other public and private community-based organizations such as Social Security field offices, Employment Networks (ENs), American Job Centers, state VR agencies, public schools, mental health and developmental disabilities organizations, and Individual Development Account (IDA) or asset-building organizations.

Competency Area 3: Understanding Social Security Disability Benefits and Associated Work Incentives

Module 3 presents detailed information on the Title II and SSI disability programs and work incentives, including how wage employment affects eligibility for benefits, cash payment amounts, and Medicare and Medicaid coverage; the impact of earned income on SSI and Title II disability benefits for concurrent beneficiaries; and the effect of Net Earnings from Self-Employment (NESE) on SSI and Title II cash payments. We also provide technical information about all the relevant Social Security work incentives such as Plans to Achieve Self-Support (PASS), Student Earned Income Exclusion (SEIE), Blind Work Expenses (BWE), Trial Work period (TWP), Extended Period of Eligibility (EPE), Subsidy & Special Conditions, Impairment Related Work Expenses (IRWE), and Expedited Reinstatement (EXR). Finally, Module 3 offers a comprehensive description of the TtW program, including Ticket eligibility, assignment and unassignment procedures, reporting requirements, timely progress requirements, and making referrals to ENs and state VR agencies.

Competency Area 4: Healthcare Planning and Counseling

Module 4 provides detailed information on the availability of and eligibility for the Medicaid program, including optional Medicaid groups, Medicaid Buy-in programs, Medicaid waiver programs, Medicare Savings Programs, and Special Medicaid Beneficiaries. This module also covers eligibility for and the operations of the federal Medicare program, availability of alternate health insurance coverage options (employer-sponsored health plans and private plans for self-employed individuals), and federal legislation protecting the healthcare rights of persons with disabilities. Finally, we cover key provisions of TRICARE and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) healthcare programs for veterans and how these programs interact with Medicare and Medicaid, as well as key components of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) applicable to Social Security disability beneficiaries and their families.

Competency Area 5: Understanding Other Federal Benefits and Associated Work Incentives

Module 5 provides information on federal benefits programs and their associated work incentives, including Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Housing and Urban Development (HUD) subsidies, Workers' Compensation, Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits, veterans' benefits, and IDAs. The module also describes the interaction of these programs with Social Security disability benefits.

Competency Area 6: Providing Effective WIPA Services

Module 6 addresses the practical application of public benefits and work incentives knowledge. We describe procedures for identifying eligible beneficiaries for the WIPA program and prioritizing initial engagement, conducting initial information gathering interviews, providing Information and Referral (I&R) services, developing written Benefits Summary & Analysis (BS&A) documents and preparing written Work Incentives Plans (WIPs), and facilitating the use of necessary and appropriate work incentives. This module also discusses specific strategies for effective time management in the provision of WIPA services.

Competency Area 7: WIPA Standards and Quality Considerations for CWICs

Module 7 describes the minimum compliance requirements for WIPA projects as stated in the WIPA Cooperative Agreement Terms and Conditions. It also includes a unit that identifies specific indicators of high-quality WIPA services and addresses the CWIC's role in achieving these goals. Finally, we provide information on delivering WIPA services that adhere to the highest ethical standards, fully comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act, and accommodate linguistic and cultural differences.

The National Training and Data Center at Virginia Commonwealth University

The NTDC is responsible for implementing a comprehensive program of training, certification, technical assistance, and ongoing professional development to individuals providing intensive work incentives counseling services to Social Security beneficiaries.

Susan O'Mara, the NTDC's Director and Co-Principal Investigator, leads our team of trainers, technical assistance liaisons, technology and accessibility specialists, and administrative professionals. We identify these team members below.

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The production of a curriculum this size is a challenging task that requires many people with a variety of skills. Lucy Miller serves as the primary author and coordinates the annual update of the curriculum content, and Julie Schall organizes and manages the final production process. As the manual has grown over the years, so has their patience with our many authors and their dedication to accuracy and ease of use.

Susan O'Mara

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