



we can work campaign

The **Employment Tool** For
People with Psychiatric Disabilities
in New York State



New York Association of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services

Sponsored by the New York State Office of Mental Health





What is WE Can Work?

WE Can Work is a grassroots movement that aims to build hope and capacity among people with psychiatric disabilities in New York State to achieve meaningful employment and economic integration.

Why a grassroots movement on employment?

WE, New Yorkers with psychiatric disabilities, face enormous employment and economic disparities. The unemployment and poverty rates of people with disabilities are almost three times of those without disabilities. Two out of three people with disabilities are unemployed. One out of three people with disabilities live in poverty. These disparities are even greater for those of us with psychiatric disabilities. We have the highest levels of unemployment and poverty among all disability groups.

In addition to the evident economic consequences of the employment gap, this picture is particularly troublesome as research has demonstrated that unemployment has harmful effects on the physical and mental health of people with psychiatric disabilities. Furthermore, and contrary to traditional beliefs and practices, research shows that employment is actually helpful to us and instrumental to our recovery process.

Many advocacy efforts are underway to reduce our barriers to employment and to improve employment services and supports available to us. However, it is essential that we first come to believe that meaningful employment is possible for us, and that we build capacity among ourselves to take action. WE Can Work is a movement to counteract our sense of hopelessness and isolation by sharing our own stories of success, and building our own capacities and resources to achieve true economic integration.

*Join **WE Can Work** in our statewide grassroots call to action to ensure we can all exercise our right to meaningful employment and economic independence!*

WE Can Work Advisory Committee

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Would you like to join WE Can Work?

If you would like to join NYAPRS in our statewide grassroots call to work, share your WE Can Work story, or if you would like more information about other WE Can Work employment tools and resources, call or email:

Oscar Jimenez, MPH
(518) 436-0008, ext. 21 oscarj@nyaprs.org,

or visit us at: www.wecanwork.info

“WE Can Work: The Employment tool” was developed in collaboration with the Syracuse University Burton Blatt Institute (BBI). We want to give special thanks to Gary Shaheen and Dr. William Myhill, and their team at the BBI for the thoroughness of their research for this tool. We also would like to thank John Allen and Tony Trahan at the New York State Office of Mental Health Bureau of Recipient Affairs for their commitment to the wellbeing of people with psychiatric disabilities and their invaluable and continued support.

I want to go back to work, but... where should I start?

SOME TIPS FROM PEERS FOR PEERS...

- **SELF-ADVOCACY:** Discover how being actively employed can help your recovery and improve your quality of life. Inform yourself about the negative effects of unemployment on your health and recovery. Learn about successful “WE Can Work” stories. This will help you advocate for yourself when talking to your case managers, counselors, or psychiatrist. If you don’t have them yet, look for professionals who believe in your potential to recover. Do not let anyone discourage you from pursuing your employment hopes and dreams. Advocate for yourself to make sure that your employment goals are included in any treatment plan you develop with your providers. Do not accept “*it’s too early to think about employment.*”
- **WORK INCENTIVES:** Learn about the benefits and work incentives that you are entitled to receive. Do not assume that you will lose all your medical and social security benefits if you go back to work. There are many incentives that you can use to help you keep some social security benefits or receive them again if things don’t work out for you right away. There are several incentives that can also help you keep medical benefits such as Medicaid and or Medicare.
- **OUR RIGHT TO WORK:** Learn about our right to work and the ways the law protects us from discrimination on the job. Especially, learn about the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the reasonable accommodations that you are entitled to receive. You can decide if and when to disclose to your employer about your psychiatric disability. You don’t have to tell an employer immediately or even at all if you don’t want to.
- **EMPLOYMENT RESOURCES:** Find out about employment resources in New York State and your local community. There are many agencies, community organizations, and local programs that can help you get more information, receive counseling or financial aid, obtain supported employment services, and, most importantly, achieve your employment and career goals.
- **PEER SUPPORT:** Reach out to your peers who have successfully returned to work and ask them to support you. Join or help start a **WE Can Work Peer Support Group** near you. Surround yourself with people who believe in you more than you do.
- **DEVELOP YOUR WE CAN WORK PLAN:** Develop a plan to:
(1) **Obtain information** about your benefits, work incentives, resources, and rights; (2) **Figure out who will help you** to access the benefits and resources available to you; (3) **Find peers who can support you** through your process of returning to work; and (4) **Take Action:** Decide what volunteering opportunities or paid work you will pursue right way. Do not wait. There are many opportunities for you to start today.
- And always remember: **WE CAN WORK!**



SELF-ADVOCACY TOOLS

MYTH: It's best for a person with psychiatric disabilities to not work.

FACT: Many studies demonstrate that being unemployed has a harmful effect on our physical and mental health.

HOW IS EMPLOYMENT HELPFUL TO OUR RECOVERY?

“Work is extremely important both in maintaining mental health and in promoting the recovery of those who have experienced mental health problems.” (Rinaldi & Perkins, 2000)

Research shows that employment:

- **Reduces the potential of relapse:** Employment can help to increase self-esteem, lessen psychiatric symptoms, and reduce the potential for relapse in those of us with severe psychiatric disabilities.
- **Improves self-esteem and optimism about the future:** Successful employment can encourage the development of realistic, and often positive, beliefs about the future. This is important for those of us who have experienced negative changes in self-esteem and behavior.
- **Promotes social status and inclusion:** Improvements in income, status, and social contacts that come with employment assist in “tackling” the social exclusion often felt by many of us with psychiatric disabilities. The sense of achievement in an employment setting creates feelings of competence and community belonging.
- **Fosters independence:** Self-employment provides a high degree of independence and control over one's economic future, and satisfies a personal work objective. Studies show the positive effects of entrepreneurship on improving quality of life.
- **Overall quality of life:** People in competitive employment experience greater improvements in symptoms, leisure, finances, and self-esteem, when compared with people who only participate in institutionalized work settings (e.g., sheltered workshops) or in no work environments at all.

HOW IS UNEMPLOYMENT HARMFUL TO OUR RECOVERY?

Research shows that unemployment:

- **Causes financial stress:** People who had to borrow money during the previous year have twice as high a risk of depression. Who can feel good when overwhelmed by financial stress? Financial pressures also increase inactivity and social isolation. It's hard to be with others without money of your own, isn't it?
- **Decreases self-esteem:** Loss of employment causes a decline in self-esteem and psychological health even when continuing to receive full pay. Workers who regain employment have a significant improvement in self-esteem and psychological health regardless of how much they earn. Having some money to live is not enough. Having a job has value on its own for our self-esteem and dignity!
- **Increases isolation and risk behaviors:** Unemployment often comes with decrease of social supports and increased risk in use of alcohol and tobacco as ways of dealing with stress. It's hard to take care of ourselves when we are alone and don't feel optimistic about the future, isn't it?

WORK INCENTIVES

There are many incentives that can help us transition back to work without losing our benefits. Some incentives help us keep cash or health benefits. Other incentives help us have access to vocational rehabilitation services.

MYTH: If I go back to work, I'm going to lose all my social security benefits.

FACT: There are several programs that can help us transition back to work and not lose all, or sometimes any of our cash benefits.

HOW CAN WE KEEP OUR CASH BENEFITS?

Trial Work Period (TWP): The TWP allows us to keep full Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits for a nine-month trial period for any monthly earnings over \$670 (2008 figures), even if we earn over the Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA) level. As long as we continue to have a disability, the nine months do not need to be consecutive and may accumulate during a 60-month period. There is also an automatic 3-month extension.

Special SSI Payments for People Who Work (Section 1619(a)): This provision helps us to continue receiving SSI cash payments, even while working at SGA levels (\$940 per month in 2008), no longer needing the trial work period or extended period of eligibility. We can continue in 1619(a) status as long as we continue to meet all other SSI eligibility requirements and our earnings are above the SGA level per month, but below the Social Security Administration (SSA) "Break-Even Point" (\$1,446 per month for NYS in 2008).

Unsuccessful Work Attempt (UWA): UWA is an incentive to help us restart SSDI or SSI payments if our attempt of going back to work is not successful. We become eligible if we stop working, or our earnings became lower than the SGA level within six months. The attempt must have ended as a result of our disability, or due to losing services we needed to work.

Impairment-Related Work Expenses (IRWE): The IRWE can help us remain eligible for SSI or SSDI. Expenses that are directly related to our disabilities and necessary for us to work can be deducted from our total earnings to calculate if we reach the SGA. These expenses must be "reasonable out of pocket expenses" and not reimbursable from other sources, such as supported employment services, transportation costs, doctor's visits, and service animals.

Special Benefits for People Eligible Under Section 1619 (a) or (b) Who Enter a Medical Treatment Facility:

In the event that we are hospitalized in a psychiatric facility (either public or Medicaid-funded) this provision can help us to continue receiving SSI cash benefits for up to two months with the full Federal Benefit Rate (\$724 per month for NYS in 2008).



WORK INCENTIVES

MYTH: If I go back to work, I am going to lose my Medicare or Medicaid...

FACT: If we are eligible for Medicare or Medicaid, there are many ways that we can keep them.

HOW CAN WE KEEP OUR HEALTH BENEFITS?

Continuation of Medicare Coverage allows us to retain Hospital (Part A) and Supplemental Medical (Part B) Insurance for a minimum of 93 consecutive months, even if our level of employment disqualifies us for cash benefits. This coverage starts after the last month of the 9-month Trial Work Period (and the three-month extension). We must already have Medicare and remain eligible.

Medicare for People with Disabilities Who Work allows us to purchase extended Medicare coverage, if we are under age 65 and our premium-free coverage is no longer available. We may qualify for reduced premiums.

Medicaid Buy-In Program for Working People with Disabilities extends Medicaid healthcare coverage if we are employed and our income is more than Medicaid limits (\$725 per month for a single person in 2008). To be eligible we have to be New York residents between 16 and 64 years of age and have a disability as determined by the SSA. We must be engaged in full- or part-time paid work within the designated monetary limits (in 2008 an individual can earn up to \$53,028 per year and keep \$13,050 in personal assets).

Medicaid While Working (Section 1619(b)): This incentive allows us to take into account multiple deductions if our countable income is above the monthly Break-Even Point (\$1,446 for NYS in 2008). SSA may calculate an individual "threshold amount" (up to \$43,636 in 2008) taking into consideration our impairment-related work expenses, other expenses in our Plan to Achieve Self Support (PASS), a personal attendant, or medical expenses above the average state amount. To qualify for continuing Medicaid eligibility, we must continue to have a disability, need Medicaid in order to work, be unable to afford equal benefits if not working, and meet all other SSI requirements.

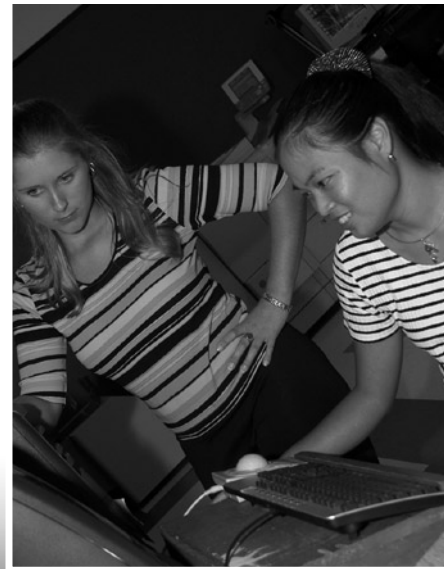
WORK INCENTIVES

WHAT OTHER INCENTIVES CAN I USE IF I'M IN A VOCATIONAL PROGRAM?

Continued Payment under a Vocational Rehabilitation Program (Section 301) allows us to continue receiving SSDI and/or SSI benefits even if we have been deemed “medically recovered” by the Social Security Administration (SSA), as long as we are actively participating in an approved vocational rehabilitation program or related services. These include Ticket to Work, a Plan to Achieve Self-Support, and other individualized services or education programs.

Ticket to Work (TTW): How does the Ticket work? The SSA issues us a ticket (we must be aged 18-64 and eligible for SSI or SSDI). We may then use our ticket to receive employment services from our choice of Employment Networks (ENs). ENs offer employment and vocational rehabilitation services, and other supports to help us start and continue working. The Ticket to Work Program is based on the idea of self-directed choice – that is, we decide which EN has the best services for our needs. Participation in the program postpones Continuing Disability Reviews (CDRs), as long as we continue to work toward our employment goal.

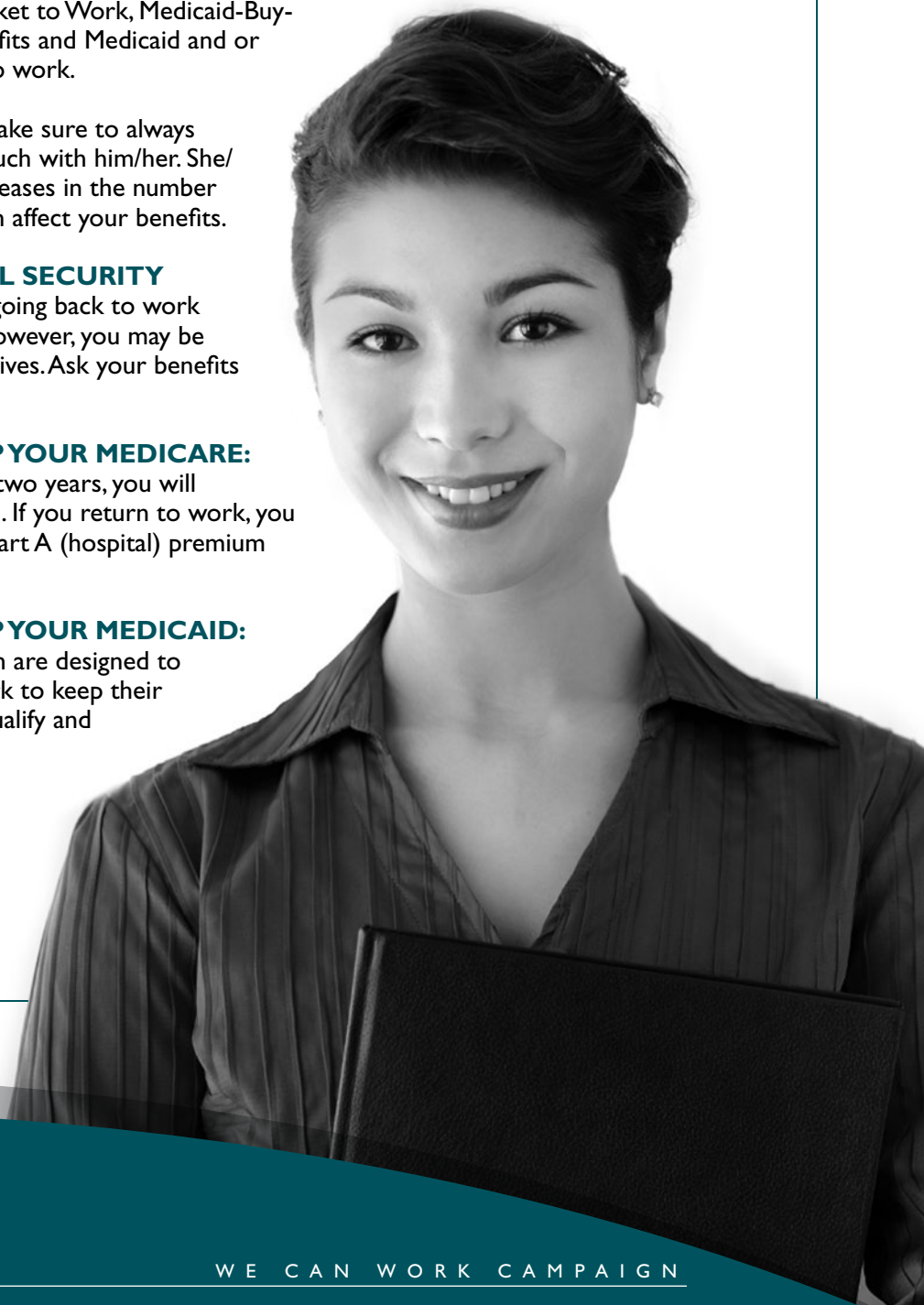
Plan to Achieve Self Support (PASS) is a structured plan we create to help us realize our employment goals. With assistance from vocational rehabilitation counselors, we can decide on a specific work goal and what we need to achieve that goal. We must then create a PASS (form available at local SSA offices or online) and submit it to the SSA. The SSA will review the plan for approval. The PASS helps us to set aside money to purchase items necessary to achieve our work goals, and allows us to make major purchases with an installment plan. Income and resources set aside under PASS are not included when calculating adjusted SSI payments.



WORK INCENTIVES

WORK INCENTIVES SUMMARY & TIPS

- **LEARN THE FACTS:** Going back to work does NOT mean that you will automatically lose your disability cash and healthcare benefits.
- **GET A “RED BOOK”:** Get a copy of the SSA “Red Book”. The Red Book is your major source of information for all issues concerning SSI, SSDI and work incentives. The Red Book is free and available at your local Social Security office or can be accessed on line at: <http://www.socialsecurity.gov/redbook/eng/main.htm>.
- **THERE ARE SEVERAL WORK INCENTIVES:** Multiple incentives (e.g., Trial Work Period, Ticket to Work, Medicaid-Buy-In) can help you keep your cash benefits and Medicaid and or Medicare while you transition back to work.
- **FIND A BENEFITS ADVISOR:** Make sure to always have a benefits advisor and stay in touch with him/her. She/he will help you understand how increases in the number of hours you work or your wages can affect your benefits.
- **WATCH YOUR SUPPLEMENTAL SECURITY INCOME (SSI):** If you receive SSI, going back to work can affect the amount you receive. However, you may be eligible for Medicaid and other incentives. Ask your benefits advisor what you may be eligible for.
- **YOU DON'T HAVE TO GIVE UP YOUR MEDICARE:** After receiving disability benefits for two years, you will automatically be enrolled in Medicare. If you return to work, you may be able to keep your Medicare Part A (hospital) premium free for a period of time.
- **YOU DON'T HAVE TO GIVE UP YOUR MEDICAID:** Programs such as the Medicaid Buy-In are designed to help people with disabilities who work to keep their Medicaid insurance. Find out if you qualify and how to apply.
- **TALK TO YOUR PEERS:** Talk to your peers who have returned to work. Ask them if they were able to keep their benefits and what they did to keep them. Learn from their successes and mistakes.



OUR RIGHT TO WORK

We, people with psychiatric disabilities, have the right to work like every other resident of New York State. There are many laws that ensure our right to work and protect us from being discriminated on the job.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

The ADA protects our civil right to work. The ADA prohibits employers with 15 or more employees from discriminating against qualified individuals with physical or mental disabilities at work. This means that employers may not discriminate during the application or hiring process, offering promotions, making terminations, determining pay, and offering training and job conditions. We are protected under the ADA as long as we can perform the essential functions of the job with or without a reasonable accommodation. Reasonable accommodations include making changes to the environment or elements of the job, as long as such changes do not present “unreasonable hardship” to the employer.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities by any program or activity receiving federal funds, including State and local government programs.

Should I tell a possible employer about my psychiatric disability?

Telling an employer about our psychiatric disability is a highly personal decision. So we must learn as much as possible, and think through our choices carefully. In the end, this decision is up to each of us. Let's keep in mind that disclosing our disability is necessary only if we need to request a reasonable accommodation. If we do not need an accommodation, we are under no obligation to disclose.

Pros and Cons Associated with Disclosing at Different Times:

- 1. Disclosing on the job application or cover letter:** It may be appropriate to disclose a disability on the application if an employer is actively seeking candidates with disabilities. This could also work to our advantage if the position directly relates to our experience as a person with disabilities. Employers may not ask disability-related questions on job applications as per the ADA.
- 2. Disclosing at an interview:** Studies show that applicants who do not disclose a disability during an interview are more likely to get a job. But if we believe that aspects of our disability are an advantage for the job we are applying for, we might consider discussing it during the interview. Be aware that if we do not receive a job offer after an interview, it is difficult to prove an ADA violation.
- 3. Disclosing after the employer makes a job offer:** Disclosing after an offer of employment might be helpful because it provides an opportunity for us to request reasonable accommodations once we have secured a job. Therefore, it may be best to wait until the employer has made a job offer before disclosing.
- 4. Disclosing after you've started working:** It may be necessary to disclose our disability if we need to ask your employer for a reasonable accommodation. Otherwise, it may not be necessary at all.

OUR RIGHT TO WORK

TIPS FOR REQUESTING A REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION

What are some examples of accommodations I can ask for?

Here are some examples of accommodations you may be able to request:

- Modifying or making flexible work schedules
- Having a support person available (such as a mentor)
- Making changes to job tasks (for example, eliminating minor or unnecessary job duties)
- Modifying work environments (for example, repositioning furniture, purchasing adaptive equipment)
- Flexible leave time (for example, taking time off for mental health reasons - paid or unpaid)

When?

- You can ask for accommodations at any time, but don't wait until you have problems in performance.

How?

- You may request reasonable accommodations yourself, or choose a representative to make the request on your behalf (for example, a job coach, therapist, or employment specialist).
- You don't have to mention the ADA or the phrase "reasonable accommodation."
- Requests do not need to be in writing, although some employers might provide forms for requests.
- Be prepared to communicate to your employer any information they need to understand your limitations, and suggest solutions. Prepare in advance with a coach, counselor, or peer you trust.

What information should I include in my request for an accommodation?

- Your disability, with as little or as much detail as you feel appropriate
- Emphasize that you are able to perform the essential functions of your job, but need accommodations
- Your limitations that interfere with your ability to do the nonessential parts of the job
- The sorts of accommodations you believe would be most effective
- The behaviors or symptoms the employer might observe, and how you prefer the employer to respond

What is the employer entitled to do?

- An employer may choose an accommodation they prefer, as long as it is effective.
- Employers may request documentation of your psychiatric disability, but only the information that is necessary for deciding upon an accommodation. Your employer may also require you to see a health professional of their choice.

For information on reasonable accommodations for people with psychiatric disabilities:

Reasonable accommodations for People with Psychiatric Disabilities On-line Resource: Resource of the Boston University Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation
<http://www.bu.edu/cpr/reasaccom/index.html>

Job Accommodation Network (JAN) offers individualized information about accommodations for people with psychiatric disabilities is available by calling: (800) 526-7234 or (877) 781-9403 (TTY)
<http://www.jan.wvu.edu/portals/individuals.htm>



EMPLOYMENT RESOURCES

One-Stop Career Centers

What is a One-Stop Center?

One-Stop Centers are usually operated through the New York State Department of Labor (NYSDOL). They help us connect to a network of services for job-seekers. One-Stop Centers can offer a variety of services, including skills assessment; career counseling; training in resume development, interviewing, and basic computer literacy; and financial assistance for educational, training, and social services. There are currently 69 full service One-Stop Centers throughout New York State. A full listing of One-Stop Centers is available at: <http://www.workforcenewyork.com/onestops.htm>

Who do One-Stop Centers serve?

One-Stop Centers assist anyone seeking a job

What services do One-Stop Centers provide?

One-Stop Centers can provide us with three types of services: core, intensive, and training.

- **Core services:** These are open to us free of cost, and can occur in large group or one-on-one settings. Core services include orientation programs; work skills exploration; resource library with computers and Internet access, telephones, and other technology; resume development and interview technique workshops; and referrals to employers.
- **Intensive services:** These free services are available to us if we have yet not obtained employment through core services. The services may include the development of a personalized employment and career plan; thorough career counseling; intensive interviewing skills development; computer workshops; and one-on-one assistance with resume and cover letters.
- **Training Services:** Through training services we can select training opportunities from any qualified organization. While training services vary with the needs of the local economy, we can participate in programs such as job readiness training, occupational skills instruction, on-the-job training, and adult education and literacy courses.

Disability Program Navigators

What is a Disability Program Navigator?

The Disability Program Navigator (DPN) is a person who can help us to “navigate” through the many services and programs offered at One-Stop Centers. Find a DPN near you.

What services does a DPN provide?

DPNs can assist us by supplying up-to-date career information; step-by-step job search assistance; job listings available by computer; free access to computers, phones, and fax machines; connection with appropriate employers and job fairs; assistance in transitioning to employment; and referral to local services including Social Security Work Incentives, the Medicaid Buy-In Program for People with Disabilities, and Dress for Success.

How can I find a DPN?

The New York State Department of Labor provides an up-to-date listing of DPNs by local Workforce Investment Area, available at: <http://www.labor.state.ny.us/workforcenypartners/dpn.shtm>



EMPLOYMENT RESOURCES IN NEW YORK STATE

New York State Job Exchange The New York State Job Exchange provides free online assistance to create a resume and cover letter, and search and apply for jobs. This service of the New York State Department of Labor (NYSDOL) allows us to introduce ourselves to prospective employers. We can also use the Job Scouts feature to have results automatically sent to us by e-mail.

<http://www.americasjobexchange.com/ny>

Potential Employers in NYS Business Directory

NYSDOL provides detailed information about businesses and employers that can be sorted by occupation or industry. Names, addresses, and contact information are available for jobs in the goods-producing and service-providing industries, including blue collar, clerical sales, service, or professional jobs.

<http://www.labor.state.ny.us/workforceindustrydata/bdirector.shtm>

JobZone

JobZone is a free, online job search and career planning system. JobZone provides information on 900 occupations. JobZone offers local and relevant search content. JobZone also gives access current job postings as well as tools such as resume builder and cover letter applications.

<http://www.nycareerzone.org>

The WORKbook: A Guide to New York City's Mental Health Employment Programs

The Coalition of Behavioral Health Agencies – Center for Rehabilitation and Recovery provides a comprehensive listing of 115 NYC mental health programs that assist people in achieving employment and career goals. Contact Deborah Short by phone at: (212)742-1600 x235, or by e-mail: dshort@coalitionny.org

http://www.coalitionny.org/the_center/workbook/

Job Accommodation Network

The Job Accommodation Network (JAN) is a free consulting service of the Office of Disability Employment Policy (US Department of Labor) that provides personalized information on job accommodations, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and other laws that protect people with psychiatric disabilities. Contact them by phone at: (800) 526-7234 or (877) 781-9403 (TTY)

<http://www.jan.wvu.edu/portals/individuals.htm>

Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities (VESID)

VESID provides referrals to vocational rehabilitation and independent living services for people with disabilities. VESID is not a direct services provider, but may be able to pay for the employment and educational services you need. Contact them by phone at: (800) 222- 5627.

<http://www.vesid.nysed.gov/home.html>

Veterans Services

NYSDOL provides information about New York State Employment and Training programs for veterans. Links to useful online employment resources are also presented. Helpline: (800) 342-3358

<http://www.labor.state.ny.us/VETs/VETINTROPAGE.shtm>

NYS Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance Services and Programs

The Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) is responsible for programs that provide assistance (e.g., Food Stamp Program and SSI/Social Security Disability). This office can help us determine our eligibility for benefits and incentives.

<http://www.otda.state.ny.us/main/programs.asp>

New York State Commission on Quality of Care and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities - Protection and Advocacy Program for Beneficiaries of Social Security (PABSS):

PABSS provides information and advice to ensure our employment-related benefits and rights, such as SSI or SSDI overpayments, job discrimination disputes, negotiation of job accommodations, defaulted student loans, housing or transportation difficulties, and accessing work incentives (e.g., Ticket to Work, Medicaid Buy-In). There are four local offices in New York State: Albany, New York City, Syracuse, and Buffalo. Contact Tom Gilbert for a confidential advice or referral at: 1 (800) 624-4143 or (518) 388-2892. You may also find an office near you at: <http://www.cqc.state.ny.us/advocacy/palist.htm#PABSS>

TIPS ON PEER SUPPORT & DEVELOPING A “WE CAN WORK” PLAN

SEEKING PEER SUPPORT FOR EMPLOYMENT CAN HELP YOU:

- **LEARN FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF OTHERS:** Reach out to peers who have successfully returned to work and ask them to help you. Peer support is one of the most effective resources we have. Use it. Someone who has experienced the challenges of going back to work may understand what you are going through. She/he has immense knowledge, strength and hope. You may also learn from her/his mistakes.
- **COME TO BELIEVE:** Surround yourself with people who believe in you more than you do. One of our most important battles is to come to believe that we can work. Peers will help you see your true potential.
- **TAKE ACTION:** Peers can help you find out information you need, connect you with organizations, help you fill out applications, go to interviews with you, and discuss your fears once you start working.
- **GAIN A SENSE OF BELONGING:** When we are part of a peer support network, we remember that we are NOT alone. So join or help start a WE Can Work Peer Support Group in your area.

DEVELOPING A “WE CAN WORK” PLAN:

Taking **ONE STEP AT A TIME** can help you see your accomplishments. Here are some of the steps you can take in making your personal plan:

1. **SEEK PEER SUPPORT:** Find peers who can support you through your process of returning to work.
2. **GET INFORMATION:** Obtain as much information as you can about your benefits, work incentives, resources, and rights.
3. **SAY WHO/HOW/BY WHEN:** Figure out who will help you to access the benefits and resources available to you, as well as how you will do so and by when.
4. **TAKE ACTION:** Decide what volunteering opportunities or paid work you will pursue right way. Do not wait. There are many opportunities out there for you. Start today!





OUR WE Can Work Stories!

Myung Park (NYC)

I was first hospitalized at the age of 15 in South Korea. A few years later I came to the U.S. hoping to get an education and a better future. But it was not easy. Learning the language was very difficult, and no one could understand me. I felt stigma and frustration. My father died in Korea one month after I left my country. In the following years I was hospitalized more than ten times and each time I stayed there for several months. I had a lot of manic episodes and I could not stop having problems with other people, so I lost my job and my marriage. I lost hope, and I thought that was what my life would be. When I was hospitalized they told me about benefits and I accepted to get SSI and SSDI, so I was on benefits for a long time. But the good news is that I have not been hospitalized in almost ten years. I think what has helped me is my satisfaction about my job, my family, and how my life is. I used to be so depressed and frustrated that I would get out of control. Now I feel good about myself. One day someone told me about the peer specialists training program, I liked the idea, so I took the training. Now I work as a Peer Specialist for Visiting Nursing Services in NYC. I love my job. I love my clients, talking and spending time with them. I feel that I can use all my skills in one place. I do art, music, talk, and facilitate groups. I was afraid I would lose my benefits, but I was able to keep my SSDI benefits for years. I was lucky that I asked and people told me about my benefits. I just stopped receiving checks a few months ago. I still have my Medicare. The support of my family and my peers are the two things that help me keep my job and stay well. My daughter is back in my life after ten years and she has her daddy again. I hang out with my peers all the time, and they help me to stay positive. Going back to work has changed my life and given me a life.

Aron Picket (Poughkeepsie)

I am legally blind. I work full time at PEOPLE, Inc. in Poughkeepsie as an Employee Advocate. However, things were not always that good. In 1992 my vision began to go bad. I had an operation on my left eye but the surgery did not help. Then I was 95% blind in that eye. My left eye begun to wander, making me look funny, and I did not like it. I did not want anyone to see me like that, so I fell into a deep depression. I stayed in my house for two years. I would not shave or take care of myself. I was alone all the time and I did not want anyone to see me. But one day, my best friend came home after being in jail for two years. He came to my house and asked me what was wrong with me. Why was I feeling like that? He took me on. He helped me to get a job working with disabled kids in the recreation department. We would take the kids on trips into the community, and one place we used to go was the public pool. When we would get in the water with the kids everybody used to move far away from us or they would get out of the pool. Instead of the kids feeling badly, they would say "Good, more room for us." I took their spirit and ran with it. They gave me hope to keep going. If these kids could stay positive, I knew I could too. So I decided to go back to work and live my life. But going back to work was not easy. I was afraid of losing my benefits. I thought I would lose all my benefits if I made more than \$900 dollars. But fortunately someone told me that I was eligible to make more because I am blind. So now I work doing something I love and I've been able to keep my benefits. Now I don't feel sorry for myself. I work, I drive, and now I help other people just like me to get back into the workforce, so that they know that recovery is possible and there is always hope.

Iliana Lasanta (Newburgh)

I never thought I would see the day when I would be where I am today. My journey started while I was living at “Project Life” with my son Antonio. I became very depressed and started counseling. During a counseling session my therapist recommended that I join a day program called “Hudson House,” which is part of Orange County Mental Health in Newburgh. There I got a job coach and started going to interviews. A lot of time passed and I got nowhere. I finally found an apartment and moved in. Finally I got a job, but there was a big problem. I didn’t have a babysitter to watch Antonio while I was at work. I thought I couldn’t work because I could not have him with just anyone. All the daycare centers would say they were not trained to deal with a child that had special needs. All the time I would ask myself what I was supposed to do. Suddenly, I found a friend that agreed to come and watch over him while I went to work. But then there was another obstacle: I didn’t have decent clothes to wear to work. Thanks to VESID, they gave me with a voucher for clothes to get me started. Then again, another obstacle: I didn’t have transportation to get to work. VESID paid for driving lessons, but I walked to work for two years until I finally got a car. I am pleased to say that I am happy to have overcome my fear of returning to work. I have gained a better quality of life for myself and my child. However, my journey doesn’t stop here. I work in retail but this is not the job I want to do for the rest of my life. In the near future I would like to return to school and pursue a career that will help me achieve the life style I deserve and have for so long desired. My advice to anyone who wants to return to work is to just try it, even if at first you don’t succeed push yourself a little further every time. The sky is the limit.

On behalf of the “Hudson House” (Program of the Mental Health Association in Orange County), Pauline Bailo (left) presents Iliana Lasanta (right) with the vocational “Rising Star Award” in recognition for her perseverance and success in showing that WE Can Work





we can work
campaign



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