

A 'Ticket' to Opportunity

Ticket to Work Program is Working

By Tom Gloss

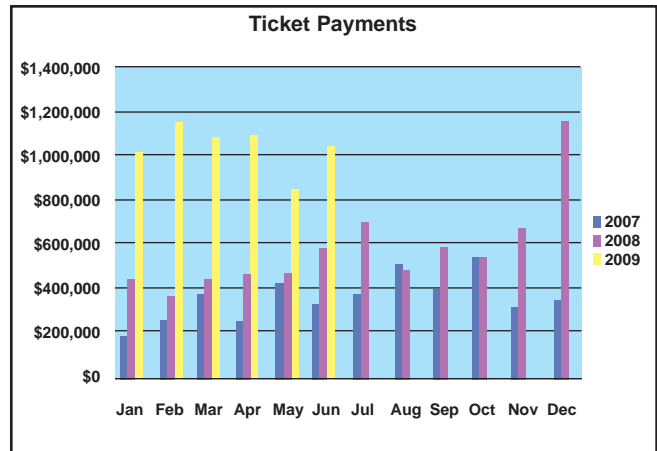
As mounting challenges influence the well-being of disability service providers and their clients, many organizations need to find new and inventive solutions in order to meet their goals. Demand for disability and employment services is *increasing* as most government and charitable budgets are *shrinking*.

APSE's goal of equitable employment for people with disabilities IS attainable, but only if member service providers and consumers have the adequate resources, knowledge, and opportunities to navigate the turbulent waters of our nation's economic and employment situation.

What's a service provider to do? Utilize the Ticket to Work.

An abundant revenue stream IS available for those organizations willing to help people with disabilities in their efforts to work. An organization that signs on as an "Employment Network" (EN) through the Social Security Administration's (SSA) Ticket to Work program can gain access to non-restrictive funds that may improve the capacity or quality of the support services that organizations can offer.

The Ticket legislation was signed into law in 1999 as the *Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act*. Its major purpose was to offer people with disabilities who were receiving benefits from the Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs a variety of employment options. In a departure from traditional vocational rehabilitation models, the Ticket program provides a bonus to the EN when the beneficiary Ticket holder attains required levels of earnings rather than paying a fee for a designated service. An EN may be any organization (other than a



federal agency) equipped to provide employment-related services to individuals with disabilities. These services may include job counseling, training, interviewing preparation, job coaching, and other job support services.

Here's how it works.

SSA issues Tickets to beneficiaries with disabilities (ages 18 through 64). Tickets can then be used to obtain rehabilitation, employment services, or a job from any EN that agrees to provide these services when a beneficiary has contacted them. Once an EN chooses to work with the beneficiary, it is responsible for providing the agreed-upon services, as long as the Ticket remains assigned to that EN. Once the beneficiary reaches specified earnings-related Milestones and Outcomes, the EN receives payments from SSA.

As employment success rates of Ticket holders improve, so does the cash flow to the EN. Service providers that become ENs find much needed, non-restrictive revenue added to their bottom line. In many cases, the Ticket program income enables a provider to expand the quality or scale of disability support services that it offers. For employers who hire individuals with

disabilities, this means meeting diversity guidelines while tapping into a unique and valuable talent pool. In short, it means turning diversity into dollars.

Recent changes to Ticket program are proving successful.

In July 2008, SSA implemented new Ticket program regulations that improved the speed and quantities of payments made to ENs. A significant change to the Ticket program involves rewarding ENs when Ticket holders attain earnings that are consistent with part-time employment. The new regulations recognize that part-time work is a good start, and an EN can receive more than \$4,800 based on a Ticket holder earning only \$700 per month in 9 months out of an 18-month period. While earnings are required to be at the \$700 per month level, the first Milestone payment of \$1,211 to the EN can be made once the Ticket holder earns \$350 in a calendar month, recognizing that employment may begin mid-month.

Since the new regulations have gone into effect, Ticket assignments to ENs have increased by 26%, and payments to ENs have grown exponentially. As more service providers discover the value of the Ticket program, a robust infrastructure of ENs is forming nationwide that is realizing the rewards of helping beneficiaries return to work. The increase in payments is reflected in the chart on page 1

In addition to the chart, the following facts about the Ticket program should also be noted:

➤ From August 2008 through June 2009, 368

ENs in 518 locations have been approved.

➤ New Tickets assigned to ENs had been averaging about 300 per month in 2007 — they are now averaging about 900 per month and exceeded 1,000 in both March and April 2009.

➤ While the amounts of Ticket payments to ENs seemed high in August and September 2008, in December 2008 they exceeded \$1 million for the first time and are averaging at that level this year. (Note that these numbers include payments to State VR agencies acting as ENs but do not include payments to them under the SSA Cost Reimbursement program.)

Summary

For the beneficiary Ticket holder, actively using the Ticket means increased likelihood of achieving employment goals as well as gaining protection from SSA's medical continuing disability reviews. Those regularly scheduled reviews are not conducted — as long as the Ticket is actively in use, and the beneficiary is making timely progress in education and employment efforts. The beneficiary also has the safety net provided by SSA's existing work incentives, including the continuation of Medicare and Medicaid in accordance with state and federal rules.

To learn more about SSA's Ticket to Work program, visit www.ssa.gov/work. If you are interested in becoming an Employment Network, contact CESSI, SSA's Program Manager for Recruitment and Outreach, at 1-877-743-8237 or visit www.cessi.net/ttw. ■

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Real Ticket Success!

“[Participating in SSA's Ticket to Work program] was the best decision I've made in my 10-year career with TCOE. ...We are now at a point where our program is totally self-sufficient with TTW revenue. We have just had our most successful months ever, [doubling] monthly revenues. We have worked very hard in our endeavors, and are now able to hire even more staff. [TCOE has] a [substantial] surplus this year! We are very appreciative of [SSA's] new regulations allowing us to serve more people with disabilities. This program has turned out to be everything I envisioned it to be five years ago. We now have a revenue stream that will pay the bills and we are no longer subject to [annual] budget reductions, contract reductions, and cancellations. We are finally there!” ■

— Karen Davidson, Regional Coordinator at the Tulare County Office of Education (TCOE) in California

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