

Letter from Associate Commissioner Bob Williams About the Responsibility of ENs to Clearly Explain the Goals of the Ticket to Work and Self Sufficiency Program

December 6, 2011

The Ticket to Work and Self Sufficiency program was created in 1999 to provide Social Security disability beneficiaries the choices, opportunities and supports needed to become and stay employed, increase their earnings and eventually leave and remain off benefits by being fully self supporting, whenever possible. Over the past few months, concerns have been raised by Congress, the Government Accountability Office, Employment Networks and beneficiaries as to whether we are collectively explaining the purposes and goals of the program to beneficiaries who are participating in the program or considering doing so. Modeled concerns also have been raised as to whether some Employment Networks have been encouraging beneficiaries to “park” or suppress their earnings below the SGA level indefinitely. We regard the encouragement or condoning of such behavior to be improper for an EN to engage in and we will terminate contracts for ENs that purposefully engage in such practices.

I am writing to you to address both sets of concerns, by offering the following guidance on your responsibilities to assure that beneficiaries are informed of the purposes and goals of the program, which I believe is fundamental to both their and your success.

As an Employment Network under contract with the Social Security Administration, you have the affirmative obligation to:

- Inform and educate Ticket holders that the dual purpose of the program is to provide individuals with the opportunities and supports they need to go to work, increase earnings and become self sufficient by leaving cash benefits to the maximum extent feasible;
- Provide employment support services that afford Ticket holders the opportunity and support to prepare for, obtain and retain career ladder jobs that will realistically enable them to leave and remain off cash benefits;
- Avoid even the appearance of advising or condoning the practice of artificially manipulating one’s earnings to remain on cash benefits; and,
- Fairly and objectively, advise each Ticket holder on the benefits and risks of leaving cash benefits and becoming self-sufficient.

Attached are talking points on this subject that I want you to share with all of your staff for use with beneficiaries.

It is likewise important to understand that in helping our beneficiaries on the road to self-sufficiency, as an EN, you must offer the types of opportunities and supports that will enable a Ticket holder to achieve financial independence. Therefore, it is unacceptable for an EN to limit its business model to assisting Ticket holders to engage in part time employment only.

We here in OESP know the work you do every day matters. It matters to the success of our programs, and, most importantly, to whether Ticket holders have a chance at creating better lives. The work you do is central to whom we are as a nation and in making the American Dream come alive for many. Again, we thank you for it. I know you share our commitment to constantly improve upon the availability and quality of all of our employment support programs and, most importantly, to the real life results that they produce, both with and for Ticket holders. I know that most of you work very hard on advancing these aims everyday, however, we are aware that there are some entities that are intentionally gaming the program. In the coming year we will be working to ensure ENs that are advancing the goals of the programs receive the support they need to do so while identifying and curbing abuse whenever we find it.

Best wishes for 2012.

Bob Williams
Associate Commissioner
Office of Employment Support Programs
Social Security Administration