

Federal agencies to combat homelessness. SSA developed a plan to improve services to individuals experiencing homelessness, and has established a workgroup to oversee implementation of the plan, which includes a Web site with information about SSA programs, as well as links to other resources (<http://www.socialsecurity.gov/homelessness/>).

3. SSA Outreach

SSA conducts outreach and education to the general public and social service providers regarding available benefits. These services are primarily developed and provided by local field offices (FO). Current outreach activities include:

- Establishing ongoing relationships with organization, including shelters, churches, and county welfare departments to provide immediate assistance and improve access to Social Security's programs;
- Working with the Veteran's Administration to assist homeless veterans filing claims;
- Visiting homeless shelters, social service agencies, and hospitals to take claims;
- Distributing public information materials to agencies, and maintaining resource information about those agencies;
- Training community service providers;
- Establishing state-wide memorandums of understanding (MOU) for SSI pre-release applications from prisons; and
- Developing liaisons with new service providers.

SSA also provides information about Social Security and SSI benefits to national advocacy organizations for dissemination to affiliates, professionals and consumers. SSA prepares and releases a Monthly Information Package to all FOs that contains print media products for placement with local media, and a monthly newsletter, the Social Security Courier, which is sent to advocacy groups, nonprofit organizations, and intergovernmental entities. These products contain information on programs and issues relevant to homeless populations.

SSI Outreach Projects. In the 1990's, Congress provided funding for SSA to conduct the SSI Outreach Demonstration Programs, which helped SSA to learn a great deal about how third parties could help the agency to find and serve aged and disabled individuals. SSI Outreach tested a number of approaches. Homeless individuals were one of the target populations within those projects. SSA learned a great deal from SSI Outreach

about how to more effectively serve individuals who were homeless and in underserved populations. Some of the findings were that third-party entities could successfully:

- Assist individuals with completing applications for benefits;
- Track claimants and provide assistance in response to SSA requests for additional information;
- Conduct presumptive disability screenings;
- Refer individuals for other needed services.

Lessons Learned. SSA is aware that our complex disability program is difficult for many individuals with severe disabilities to understand, and that special efforts must be made to provide application assistance. Because of variations in local needs, SSA has not developed a national outreach program; however, we have examined our past and current outreach efforts, and have determined methods that work well and have the potential to prove to be cost-effective strategies for improving our services to individuals who are experiencing homelessness. With this set of cooperative agreements, SSA intends to take the best ideas from current agency outreach efforts (*i.e.*, "best practices"), as well as the most effective approaches from the SSI Outreach projects. The features of effective efforts that we intend to incorporate in these projects include:

- SSA and DDS collaboration with service providers that have expertise in identifying, engaging, and assessing applicants who are homeless;
- Identifying contacts within SSA and the grantee organizations to facilitate communication and problem resolution;
- Presumptive disability benefits for claimants with a high probability of being found disabled under Social Security's rules;
- Grantee assistance to SSA in providing direct help to claimants in completing the application process, maintaining contact with SSA while the decision is pending, obtaining medical evidence, and providing post-eligibility assistance; and
- SSA training and technical assistance to grantees.

D. Project Goals and Objectives

The goal of these cooperative agreements will be to demonstrate efficient, replicable, and sustainable approaches for identifying individuals who are potentially eligible for benefits under any Social Security disability program, and providing direct assistance to these individuals in the benefit application process. By efficient,

we mean those methods that find and assist potentially eligible individuals, minimizing the burden of application for them, while conserving both public and private resources. By replicable, we mean approaches and methods which could be used in other settings with similar results. By sustainable, we mean methods that can continue after the cooperative agreement funding from SSA ends.

The core objectives for the projects is to identify homeless individuals who are potentially eligible for benefits, and to provide assistance to project participants that results in faster claim decisions and higher initial allowance (benefit approval) rates for those who are eligible for disability benefits under SSA's program rules. SSA will provide training to project staff in organizations which receive the cooperative agreement funding (grantees). The training will be designed to increase the knowledge that project staff have about the disability application process. The focus of the training will be on the disability determination process, specifically, on the role that the grantee can play in helping project participants to complete application paperwork, producing or locating valuable medical evidence, establishing claimant identity, verifying income and resources, providing information about the functional impact of disabling impairments, and assisting SSA in maintaining contact with claimants throughout the application process and after SSA makes a decision.

SSA is also interested in the degree to which the assistance that grantees provide to claimants results in improvements in quality of life, particularly in the area of achieving full community integration, including attaining stable housing, recovery, and employment.

E. Project Features

The HOPE projects will help SSA to demonstrate the feasibility of special approaches and services that use skilled medical and social service providers to identify, engage, and assist homeless individuals with disabling conditions. While SSA expects grantees to find homeless individuals through outreach, the focus of the cooperative agreement projects is to improve the knowledge and capacity of existing outreach providers to assist these individuals in the disability application process.

1. Use of Cooperative Agreement Funds

Grantees must use cooperative agreement funds to address the goals and objectives described in Section I.D. To that end, SSA is interested in