



Media Release

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For Immediate Release

October 26, 2011

State agencies working to increase employment of Arkansans with disabilities

Arkansas has one of the highest rates of disability in the nation. Among working-age Arkansans, 16 percent report having physical or mental impairments, and 10.2 percent receive Social Security or SSI disability benefits. This high rate of disability places a burden on government programs, reduces the state's workforce, and traps many people in poverty.

Many individuals with disabilities would like to work and can work successfully, despite genuine impairments. In October 2010, Governor Beebe signed Executive Order 10-17, instructing State agencies to take steps to increase employment of Arkansans with disabilities.

The executive order created a Task Force of State agency representatives, along with provider and consumer group representatives. DHS divisions participating in the Task Force included the Divisions of Aging and Adult Services, Behavioral Health Services, Developmental Disabilities Services, Services for the Blind and Community Service and Nonprofit Support.

Task Force members developed plans to reduce barriers to employment in State programs and services. One of the top priorities is to increase awareness of work incentives, which are rules that allow individuals to work and keep some or all of their benefits. Typically SSDI and SSI beneficiaries can now:

- Work part-time, limit their earnings, and continue to receive their cash benefits and Medicare and/or Medicaid; or
- Work full-time and give up their cash benefits, but keep Medicare and/or Medicaid.

Some of these provisions also apply to Medicaid, because many categories of Medicaid use SSI income exclusions. Under SSI rules, less than half of earned income is counted, and some Arkansas SSI beneficiaries earn over \$1,000/month and still receive a small SSI check and Medicaid. Many others earn too much to receive an SSI check, but continue to qualify for Medicaid, as long as they meet other SSI criteria.

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Unfortunately, many Arkansans are not aware of these work incentives, or about free counseling about employment and how it will affect their benefits (call toll-free, 866-283-7900). Even disability providers and public agency staff are often unaware of provisions to encourage employment.

One of the best ways to educate people is through success stories and testimonials. Here are a few examples of Arkansans with disabilities who are successfully employed, but still receive vital services.

Former SSI Recipient helps others who want to work

Shannon Cleveland of Conway has quadriplegia, and used to receive SSI benefits. She now works full-time as a work incentives counselor, helping other disability beneficiaries who want to work. Under federal law, Shannon is still entitled to Medicaid coverage, and she also qualifies for the Alternatives for Adults with Physical Disabilities (AAPD) waiver.

Her job involves explaining work incentives to individuals, helping them determine how their job plans will affect their benefits, and helping them navigate the system, including dealing with SSA and their DHS County Office. Shannon and other work incentives counselors encourage individuals to report their income, to avoid overpayments and unexpected loss of benefits.

Former group home resident now owns his own condo

After high school, Pat Long of Hot Springs lived in a group home and attended day treatment. With help from the supported employment program at First Step, a local provider agency, Pat got a job at the local Kroger store.

After more than 20 years of employment, Pat still works at Kroger, but he now lives independently in his own condo. Pat still receives some benefits, but he is much more self-sufficient than before he went to work. Pat is also involved in his community as a member of two civic groups.

Teacher relies on waiver services

Like Shannon Cleveland, Charles Zook of Little Rock has quadriplegia and relies on the AAPD waiver services for help with daily activities. Despite his physical impairment, Charles works as a Spanish teacher, and drives himself to work from Little Rock to Maumelle in his lift-equipped van. Charles is married and involved in his community.

After working full-time for a year, Charles' Social Security Disability benefits stopped, but his Medicare continued. He has applied for Working Disabled Medicaid, which will enable him to increase his earnings and remain eligible for Medicaid. Working Disabled participants can also use AAPD waiver services, such as attendant care, if they meet medical criteria for the waiver.

For more information

The Employment Sources Hotline is a valuable resource for individuals with disabilities who want to work. The Hotline screens individuals for Working Disabled Medicaid, refers them to counseling on work incentives, and makes referrals for vocational rehabilitation and employment services. The Hotline's toll-free number is 1-866-283-7900, and it operates between 8:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m., Monday through Friday.