

# ***SSI Advocacy Case Management: Innovative Strategies Adaptable to Santa Clara County***

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

SSI Advocacy is a program which assists indigent clients within the public assistance system through the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) application process. This program exists in both Santa Clara County and San Francisco County with differences in the business structures, functionality, and resource allocation. This case study describes a fictitious client working his way through the Santa Clara County SSI Advocacy program. He exemplifies the significant challenges currently faced by clients. Although barriers have been compounded to reflect a “worst case scenario,” they frequently present themselves in most cases. After examining San Francisco County’s program, it became evident that numerous enhancements can be made to the Santa Clara County SSI Advocacy business structure.

### **Recommendations for Santa Clara County**

It is recommended that Santa Clara County Department of Employment and Benefit Services (DEBS) adopt these positive elements from the San Francisco County SSI Advocacy Model:

- Development of an SSI-Pending case carrying eligibility unit to work in partnership with the assigned SSI Advocate in case development
- Appointment of a Medical Records Clerk to assist in obtaining pertinent medical information
- Creation of a medical team that will collaborate with advocates to build each case
- Adoption of focused performance standards and guidelines for the SSI Advocacy Unit

The adoption of these recommendations will benefit both the client and county by providing optimum service delivery and maximizing of available resources while ensuring highest SSI approval award rates.

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## Introduction

*“Recently released from his fourth job, Joe found himself without a home, food or money. Intent on changing the direction of his life, he followed a friend’s advice and applied for public assistance at Santa Clara County General Assistance Bureau. During his Intake interview, Joe was asked if he was employable or unemployable, a standard question asked of all applicants. Joe responded, that he was able to work but has been suffering from chronic lower back pain, the back pain which had caused him numerous sick days that ultimately led to his dismissal from his previous places of employment. After further investigation the Intake Eligibility Worker determined that Joe’s on-going condition was the source of his inability to maintain employment. As part of his eligibility responsibilities he was referred to the SSI Advocacy Unit for evaluation and possible assistance in obtaining SSI benefits . . .”*

While Joe remains a fictitious character, his circumstances are representative of what many Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Advocacy clients are experiencing as they go through the Public Assistance system. Joe’s failure to recognize the severity of his condition prevented him from realizing that his physical inabilities may have made him eligible for SSI benefits. Fortunately, his fate has taken a turn for the better and he is receiving assistance through the GA Bureau where an SSI Advocate will assist him through the SSI application process.

On a mission to increase the number of SSI approvals and Interim Assistance Reimbursement (IAR), the Santa Clara County GA Bureau is constantly evaluating and seeking improvement to op-

imize its business process and delivery of client services. Joe’s case is a summation of many ongoing challenges; and, as a, “worst case,” scenario, highlights individual areas allowing us to explore potential “solutions” by providing a comparison between Santa Clara’s current business processes with that of San Francisco County.

## Background/Historical Review

*“Joe’s cash benefits have been approved and his case is being evaluated by an SSI Advocate. The dedicated staff of social workers has the expertise necessary to assist disabled clients move productively through the SSI system. These advocates assist the community by providing a link into the SSI system for those unable to complete the process independently.”*

Established in 1985 by the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors, the SSI Advocacy Program is a specialized program developed to address SSI Assembly Bill 2779 which allows social workers to provide SSI Advocacy services to the recipients of the General Assistance (GA) program and the Cash Assistance Program for Immigrants (CAPI) that assists disabled GA clients suffering from physical and/or mental deficiencies for a duration greater than twelve months. The social workers assist disabled clients through the social security application and/or appeal process with the ultimate goal of an SSI and/or RSDI approval for the client. The SSI Advocacy Unit also assists clients with transitioning from the GA Program to CAPI and finally onto the SSI Program. CAPI clients are also educated about citizenship and eventual qualification for SSI.

SSI approvals carry equal benefits to both the client and the county. Through the means of stable income and medical benefits clients are enabled to improve their quality of life. Through the Interim Assistance Reimbursement (IAR) provisions of the Social Security Act, IAR counties are able to recover monies allocated to the client during the SSI application process from the individual's initial retroactive SSI payment.

Under a different organizational structure, San Francisco County provides SSI Advocacy services as well. Since its inception in 2004, the SSI case management unit has operated with the same primary objectives as Santa Clara County. Realizing the need based on the number of disabled clients identified through their "Triage" process, as well as clients self-initiating the SSI application process with numerous denials, San Francisco County developed a program designed to assist these disabled clients through the SSI system. The program has proved successful with strategies focusing on intensive case management and development.

### Current Business Processes

*"Joe is eager to begin his application for SSI benefits, however, the process is lengthy and often time consuming. Throughout the process he is still receiving his General Assistance benefits and his eligibility case has been assigned to an ongoing case worker. In the coming months Joe will be asked to attend doctor appointments and regular meetings with his SSI Advocate to provide records and information to supplement his SSI Application."*

Santa Clara County provides all the necessary services to enable clients to fulfill the requirements of the SSI application process. Once identified by Eligibility Intake, disabled clients are referred to the SSI Advocacy Unit. Working independently (without the aid of eligibility staff), they manage the clients SSI pending case. SSI Advocacy is supported by an on-site psychologist who performs psychological evaluations for clients with potential mental disabilities at a maximum of 24 per month. There is also a contract with the Valley Health Center/County

Hospital to provide medical evaluations for physical disabilities at a rate of 20 per month.

The current SSI application process for Santa Clara County is as follows:

- 1 Client, after receiving referral from Intake, meets with an SSI Advocate
  - An initial assessment is made on the client's reported disability
  - Both client and advocate initiate application process by completing the SSI Online Application.
  - Advocate coordinates an appointment with SSA to complete the application process.
  - Client receives directions on responsibilities in obtaining their medical history.
  - Medical appointment is scheduled with on-site psychologist or county hospital to provide Santa Clara County with a Medical Verification of Disability.
  - Return appointment is scheduled once client has fulfilled requirements (scheduled medical appointments and/or medical record search).
- 2 Second meeting with advocate:
  - Client returns medical records and current verification of disability as diagnosed at recent appointment
  - Advocate prepares a full written disability assessment including supporting medical documents for meeting with Social Security Administration (SSA).
  - Appointment is scheduled with SSA to finalize SSI Application.
- 3 SSI Advocate and Client meet with SSA
  - All submitted documents are reviewed and forwarded to SSA Eligibility unit for analysis

Similarly, San Francisco County's SSI Case Management Unit assists clients with disabilities to qualify for Social Security benefits. This unit is an alliance of staff from several fields providing a holistic approach to managing each GA case with SSI Pending. In conjunction with a specialized group of continuing eligibility workers (SSIP unit) the SSI Case Management unit cultivates each case while following strict timelines and communication protocols

during the stages of each individual case. Additionally, the Disability Evaluation and Consultation Unit (DECU) provides on-site medical evaluations for clients without current providers. DECU is comprised of Clinical Psychologists, Social Workers, Registered Nurses and a Physician Specialist. Together each component of the unit provides direct services in an organized and time-structured manner.

The current San Francisco County SSI application process is based on a Four Phase Plan and is outlined as follows:

- 1 Phase 1, Client meets SSI Case Management Triage Worker who:
  - Provides an initial disability assessment, and
  - Make referral to SSIP (Continuing Eligibility) unit as well as the SSI Case Management Unit
- 2 Phase 2, Formal Assessment
  - Initial appointment is made between client and advocate.
  - Advocate performs interview to collect relevant medical information regarding the disabling condition and
  - Coordinates with DECU for official medical assessment
  - Coordinates with Medical Records clerk to obtain medical history
  - Prepares and presents case at weekly case management meeting between DECU and SSI Advocacy to determine if case has feasible claim for SSI
- 3 Phase 3, Development
  - Development of comprehensive SSI Application packet (4–5 meetings to complete necessary forms, gather medical verification and supporting documents)
- 4 Phase 4, Liaison
  - Ensuring that application is processed timely with complete data
  - 2 weeks after delivering application packet to Social Security Administration advocate collaborates with State Disability analyst to monitor status of application and provide follow-up information or additional supporting documents if necessary

## 5 Post-Grant or Denial

- If approved, advocate notifies Continuing SSIP Eligibility Worker, DECU team, Fiscal Management/Collections and SSI Advocacy Department Manager
- If denied, advocate reviews with DECU unit and proceed with Reconsideration (Recon) process if necessary. If denied at Reconsideration, client referred to Administrative Law Judge (ALJ) or Attorney.

### **Inherent Challenges in the Santa Clara County Process**

*“Since his initial appointment with an SSI Advocate, Joe has been asked to obtain his previous medical records, as well as schedule an appointment with a physician to verify his disability. Having a checkered past, Joe had spent time in a correctional facility where he had last been treated for his lower back pain. Attempts made to obtain his medical records from the state institution were unsuccessful causing Joe frustration. Weeks have passed and Joe’s scheduled appointment at the county hospital is approaching. Unfortunately, Joe’s monthly GA benefits have been exhausted and he has no transportation to his appointment. He attempted to reschedule his appointment with the hospital for the following month and was unsuccessful. Discouraged with the process, Joe abandoned the SSI application process. Subsequently, his eligibility case was discontinued due to “loss of contact.”*

In our story, Joe’s initial challenge was in obtaining his medical history records. For an average person, this is not such a daunting task but considering our client’s limited access to telephone, fax machines, or transportation to and from the physician’s office, it proves to be more problematic. In some instances multiple visits must be made and out of area excursions are a possibility which may be beyond the means of the client. Several other factors contribute to a client’s inability to return medical records. As many clients are homeless or lacking a continuous residence, there is a possibility of physical loss or destruction of the records requiring duplicates to be obtained. Also, upon receipt of documenta-

tion, advocates sometimes find the documents are returned in an illegible or disorganized state requiring additional time to reconfigure or determine the content. Failure to complete these requirements will result in the advocate's inability to make a complete assessment thus resulting in discontinuance of cash benefits.

Compounding his problems, Joe was scheduled to receive an evaluation at the county hospital. The accommodations provided specifically for GA clients are extremely limited and not exclusive to those seeking SSI. Currently, the hospital booking date for new patients lacking medical insurance is 4–8 weeks lengthening the client's wait time between an initial Advocacy appointment and an appointment at the Social Security Administration (SSA). Further complicating the situation is the lack of flexibility in scheduling times, an inability to reschedule an existing appointment and the likelihood of arriving late or being a "no show" and unable to reschedule an appointment for another 4–8 weeks. Appointment availability is also subject to restriction based on budgeting restraints and program limitations. Another deficient aspect of the Disability Verification process is that a client is seen and treated by a general physician as an undistinguished patient. The doctor has no prior knowledge of the client's medical history or disability and the client receives treatment as such. Those requiring physicians in specialized care to diagnose the disability are often denied services because they don't have the means to fund them, nor does the hospital.

Additionally, though Joe was making an effort to pursue SSI, his eligibility case was discontinued for failure to return a quarterly income report. Simultaneously Joe's SSI Advocacy case must be discontinued as well. The current process design has both Eligibility and SSI Advocacy working independently of each other on each case with minimal communication protocols or guidelines in place. At any point in time, an occurrence or status change may take place without the other's knowledge that may have been avoidable. Aggravating this problem is the varying level of service provided by Eligibility Work-

ers based on their experience with or knowledge of SSI. Each Eligibility Worker's caseload is comprised of clients with various program complexities and requirements; the Supplemental Security Income Pending (SSIP) cases are dispersed throughout the continuing units. The caseload needs detract from the focus and attention that may be required for the client's SSI case potentially creating a service disruption.

## Recommendations

*"This is a critical junction in Joe's life, It's at this point where he can reapply for GA and continue his pursuit of SSI or return to his previous lifestyle. Understanding his position is essential in the SSI Advocate's ability to perform their duties, and the business process should mirror the clients' efforts. To properly serve these clients, it is imperative that the County continue to evaluate their services and remain responsive to client needs. Realizing this, many improvements were implemented reducing some of the burdens facing SSI Advocacy clients. Luckily, Joe made the right decision and returned to GA to re-initiate his SSI application process. The significant changes made within the program enabled his advocate to build a case around his official medical diagnosis, "Severe Renal Failure." Joe's case was awarded an approval for SSI and Medical Benefits, providing him with the intensive medical care and treatment that would eventually prevent an otherwise fatal ailment."*

Santa Clara County's SSI Advocacy Unit structure has been in commission for more than twenty years with minimal enhancements to its business processes. While aware of some challenges within Santa Clara's structure, they were magnified when compared to San Francisco's model. The financial feasibility of implementing an SSI Advocacy program similar to San Francisco's may not be a viable option. However, there are scaled down enhancements that can be made to fit within budget that will streamline the SSI application process for achieving optimum award rates. It would be advantageous for Santa Clara County to consider the following recommendations for its current SSI Advocacy unit structure. These strategies are outlined below:

- **Develop from the current pool of continuing case carrying Eligibility Workers a unit that specializes in Eligibility for SSI pending cases both in General Assistance (GA) and Cash Assistance Program for Immigrants (CAPI).**

This dedicated unit would concentrate solely on administering benefits to those individuals with SSI pending cases by familiarizing themselves with SSI regulations as well as work in partnership would the SSI Advocate. This unit will be housed with the SSI Advocacy unit to work side by side in obtaining pertinent information during the case development phase. This joint effort would ensure SSI pending eligibility cases are not discontinued without consulting with the assigned Advocate. Funding of this specialized unit would be minimal and require only training costs. Likewise, office caseloads and services would experience very little impact as this would merely be a staffing and caseload re-structuring.

- **Appoint, from the existing clerical pool, a medical records clerk.**

This is a crucial component currently lacking. Obtaining Medical History records is a mandatory element of the SSI Application process. Relieving the clients of this burden will reduce the financial obligations associated with records collection and yield a higher record return rate and reduce wait times. SSI Advocacy already has a dedicated clerical worker to provide administrative support. Expanding this worker's role to include record retention remains within the current Client Service Technician job specifications and would not have a fiscal impact.

- **Develop a Medical team to work in conjunction with SSI Advocacy to provide assessment, consultation and evaluation during case development.**

This would unify Advocacy with medical providers and enable them to fully evaluate and supply evidence of disability for case support. Current contract with a resident psychologist should be amended to increase the capacity of this worker's role to include consultative assistance to SSI Advocacy on determining the viability of each case as well as assisting advocates prepare formal written documentation for SSI Application. Furthermore, expansion or addition of increased Medical Provider Services should be allocated to provide quicker more accommodating medical appointments. Cost-effective resources can be obtained through collaboration with current Homeless Outreach Initiatives set forth by the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors, Veteran's Administration and Community Clinics.

- **Explore monthly performance expectations on the total number of SSI applications filed with Social Security Administration.**

Evaluate current Labor Memorandum of Agreements (MOA's) for the social work classification to establish monthly workload standards and expectations that will enable Advocates to focus more intently on Application Processing. This will ensure that Advocacy is concentrated on clients committed to successfully enduring the SSI process while securing higher approval and reward rates.

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