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Abstract

The SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) Initiative is a national program that expedites applications for Social Security disability benefits (SSI and SSDI) for eligible adults who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness and have a serious mental illness. Health Care for the Homeless in Baltimore City followed up with former SOAR clients who were approved for SSI and/or SSDI to gather data and conduct interviews regarding their long-term outcomes. Both the data and interview responses indicate that receiving benefits through SOAR created material and emotional improvements in the lives of these individuals.



Picture 1.
Health Care for the Homeless client artwork.

The Context

SOAR in Maryland facilitates applications for SSI/SSDI for individuals who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness and have a serious mental illness. The disability benefits application process is lengthy and frustrating, and especially difficult for clients who lack stability in their day-to-day life. Health Care for the Homeless provides comprehensive adult and pediatric medical care; mental health services; case management; state-certified addiction treatment; dental care; outreach; and access to housing for approximately 10,000 Marylanders annually.

Health Care for the Homeless houses the Baltimore City SOAR Lead, who coordinates the program citywide, as well as three full-time SOAR specialists. These specialists work with clients engaged with behavioral health and homeless service providers across the city, the Veterans Administration, and state psychiatric hospitals. The agency recognizes that health services cannot be provided without looking at the overall experience of the individual – including access to income and housing. With this institutional support, the SOAR program in Baltimore City has seen success and growth, serving over 430 clients with a 89% SSI/SSDI approval rate as of April 2016.

The Study

Health Care for the Homeless initiated this mixed methods program evaluation to follow-up with clients after they were approved for SSI/SSDI through the SOAR program. In-depth interviews were conducted with 32 former clients to gather their perspectives on disability benefits and the SOAR program. The evaluation looked at several factors to determine the role that disability benefits played for the individual, including housing, health, connection to care, employment, and incarceration rates. At the time of this evaluation (Spring 2015), all 32 participants reported that they were still receiving benefits, and all but one reported that their sole source of income was disability benefits. The median income rate was \$733 per month.

“SSI helped me: number one, it allowed me to survive, and number two, I continued getting my services and doing everything in my ability to get better. In the last six months, I’ve made great strides.”

- Former SOAR Client

Results: Housing

Prior to receiving benefits, only 9% of participants interviewed lived in their own housing. After receiving benefits through SOAR, 72% of participants reported living in their own housing at the time of the study. Two respondents reported using their benefits to pay rent to friends and family, increasing the security of their housing.

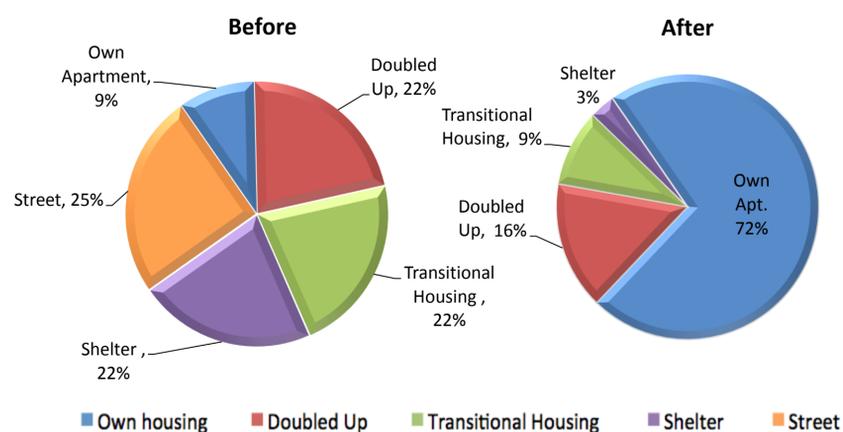


Chart 1. Housing status before and after obtaining SSI/SSDI through SOAR.

Results: Service Engagement & Employment

All participants were currently engaging in treatment or social services to promote their health and wellbeing. Many participants reported that the Medicaid enrollment that accompanies disability benefits made it easier for them to receive the healthcare they needed. They also said that their benefits allowed them to pay the co-pays for their office visits and medications.

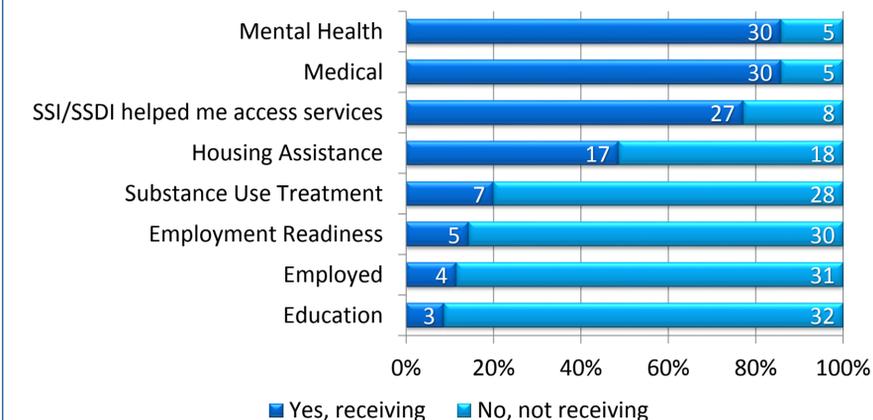


Chart 2. Participant engagement in services and employment.

Conclusions and Next Steps

The results of this evaluation lend support to the conclusion that access to income through SSI/SSDI can end homelessness and improve quality of life for individuals with a severe mental illness. Overall, being approved for disability benefits through SOAR was a life-changing event for participants – improving housing, health and quality of life outcomes. However, several participants shared how difficult they find budgeting for all their needs when SSI is their sole source of income and they receive the 2015 full federal benefit rate of \$733 per month. SOAR, however, is often the turning point that leads clients on the road to recovery, providing reliable income that opens doors and opportunities.

In Spring 2014 and Spring 2016, the SOAR teams in two other Maryland jurisdictions conducted evaluations similar to the present study. The Maryland SOAR team will next conduct a meta-analysis of data collected in all three evaluations to better understand the outcomes SOAR clients experience after receiving benefits. The team is also implementing a standard statewide follow-up survey tool, to be introduced to clients as they are applying for benefits, and then implemented at 3 and 12 months post-approval. The team expects the results will provide further evidence that SOAR is a short-term intervention that produces long-term improvements in clients’ lives.

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