

The FY 2019 Budget Should Include Funding to Help Residents Obtain Federal Disability Benefits

By Kate Coventry

Phil suffered from such severe psychosis, including hallucinations, that he was barely able to engage in conversation. Yet he had few medical records documenting these conditions to submit with his application for federal disability benefits. Luckily, he had a SOAR (SSI/ SSDI¹ Outreach, Access, and Recovery) trained worker who arranged a psychiatric evaluation, leading to quick approval for benefits. After he was told he could receive the same kind of assistance with finding housing, Phil agreed to work on moving into a home.

For DC residents like Phil, SOAR is a crucial resource. However, this critically needed application assistance is under threat because after two years, the District has stopped investing local dollars for SOAR assistance for residents who are too sick to work and depend on SSI/ SSDI benefits to meet their most basic needs. The Department of Human Services (DHS) should find this funding in its fiscal year (FY) 2019 budget. If this is not possible, the DC Council should add this funding before approving the budget for FY 2019.

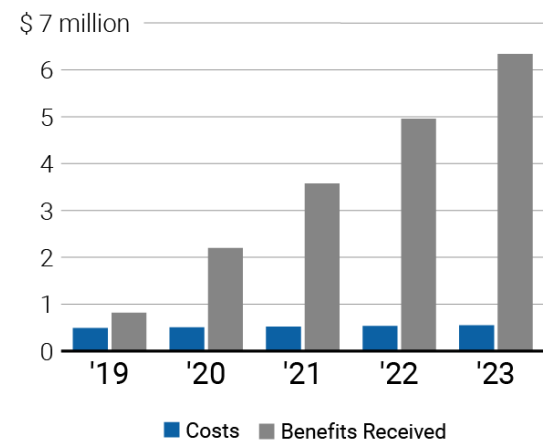
SOAR is an evidence-based, national best practice model designed to help residents who are experiencing homelessness and have a serious mental illness, a serious medical impairment, and/or a co-occurring substance use disorder. SOAR helps these residents apply for and secure federal disability benefits. Because the disability application process is so complicated, only 12 percent of these individuals are approved on initial application when they don't have help. If they are not approved, applicants face a multi-step appeal process with long wait-times. The wait time and strains of living without an income often lead to considerable additional stress, exacerbating health and mental health conditions.

Using the SOAR model, DC has been able to help 73 percent of applicants receive benefits with their initial application. This is higher than the national SOAR rate of 64 percent. Recognizing these impressive results, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) SOAR Technical Assistance Center named DC one of the “Top 10” in 2017.

The per-person cost of SOAR is \$3,503 in the first year and \$2,402 in subsequent years. Each new approval yields at least \$9,000 of benefits for the recipient per year (SSDI recipients typically receive more). Each year, the *total* benefits flowing to DC residents increases as the individuals approved in previous years continue to receive benefits and new individuals are approved (*Figure 1*). If an individual helped by SOAR

Figure 1.

Benefits Received Greatly Outweigh Costs



Source: DC SOAR Leadership Team.

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receives SSI benefits for 5 years, that represents at least \$12.85 in income received for every dollar invested in SOAR services.

Until recently, SOAR was funded primarily with private funding. However, because SOAR was previously not available to many who needed it, the District started supplementing privately-funded efforts with local funds provided by DHS in FY 2017 and FY 2018. While this did not completely meet the need, it allowed many more residents to receive assistance.

Given the benefits for DC residents, District leaders should ensure SOAR is funded in FY 2019. DHS should find \$500,000 in its budget, and if this is not possible the DC Council should add this funding before approving the FY 2019 budget.

For more on SOAR, see [Helping Residents Obtain Federal Disability Benefits Helps DC Residents and the District Economy.](#)

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¹ SSI refers to Supplemental Security Income; SSDI refers to Social Security Disability Insurance