

Ticket Talk



Podcast Transcript

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Ticket Talk with Lillie Lowe -Reid, Director, Disability Rights New Jersey

Opening: You are listening to the Social Security Administration's Ticket to Work podcast series. Get answers to your questions, access information and resources, and receive expert advice on work incentives and the Ticket to Work program.

Interviewer: Would you like to have a better understanding of your rights as a person who receives Social Security disability benefits? Do you think you may have been discriminated against because of your disability? Do you want to know how you can go about requesting reasonable accommodations to help you function more effectively on the job? Social Security offers free services to disability beneficiaries through Protection and Advocacy for Beneficiaries of Social Security, or PABSS organizations. PABSS organizations are responsible for protecting the legal rights of Social Security disability beneficiaries. Many beneficiaries like you want to work. PABSS provides information, advocacy, legal representation, and other helpful services. Disability Rights New Jersey, a PABSS organization, is a Ticket to Work program service provider offering legal advice and services to Social Security Disability beneficiaries. Today we are speaking with Lillie Lowe-Reid, the Director of Disability Rights New Jersey. Lillie, thank you for joining us.

Lillie Lowe: Thank you for having me. Thank you so much.

Interviewer: So tell us what a Protection and Advocacy for Beneficiaries of Social Security organization does, and the types of services that Disability Rights New Jersey offers to individuals with disabilities.

Lillie Lowe: Sure, our PABSS program basically we provide Work Incentives assistance for SSI and SSDI beneficiaries that are seeking Vocational Rehabilitation,

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employment, and other types of support services. These services are provided for individuals to secure, retain, or regain employment. Our PABSS program is one of ten programs at Disability Rights New Jersey. Our agency is here to protect and provide the advocacy services that individuals with disabilities need in New Jersey as well as other states that have the same kinds of programs.

Interviewer: So what do beneficiaries need to do to take advantage of your organization's services?

Lillie Lowe: Well, we have a process for individuals if they believe that they are being discriminated against in any way and if they're, if they have a disability, they can call our office. We have an intake unit and they would call our intake department and ask for our intake coordinator or any person who works in our intake unit. And the first thing they would do is provide information about their disability, the kinds of services they are seeking, and how they believe they are being discriminated against. And once that information is taken from the individual, then it's looked at to decide which one of these programs the individual would need to be referred to for services.

Interviewer: Alright. So can you explain how assistance from a PABSS may help beneficiaries who are working and may have experienced discrimination because of their disability?

Lillie Lowe: Well, one of the things that we have here, we have an employment discrimination program, our PABSS program, works with that program to ensure that people who are being discriminated against have information about their rights and how to proceed with that. We also have our Client Assistance program. And that program works with our VR agencies, Vocational Rehabilitation services and Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired, and also Independent Living Centers. So if a person is being discriminated against because of their disability, we can – if they're looking for employment, we can help them with the process of working with those Vocational Rehabilitation agencies to find employment. And if they need help from our PABSS program for employment discrimination we can help them in that way. We refer them to our PABSS program and work along with them to ensure that the person's rights are not

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being violated. We also can provide assistance in reasonable accommodations. If a person is being discriminated against based on, say they need some additional time to take an entrance exam to a university, a college or a university, or if they need some other kinds of reasonable accommodations on the job to help them perform the job better, then we are here to ensure these individuals receive the reasonable accommodations that they need. We also assist individuals who may need to go to our One Stop program, in each state; each state now has the One Stop system. And we can help them to navigate these different agencies and organizations so that they will know what their rights are prior to going for assistance and even after they're there, they can continue receiving assistance. We also advocate for people in the community that are in community-based employment. If an individual would rather work in the community other than going into a workshop or a community rehab facility, we would advocate for that as well to make sure that individuals who are able to work and are disabled have the opportunity to work in the community. We assist individuals in understanding that they have a right to have an employment goal and work towards those employment goals, and that they can determine what their employment goals are, not just the agency or the individuals that they're working with, that they have the right to understand their strengths, their weaknesses, and that they have a right to work out in the community. Those are the kinds of things we do as a PABSS program to make sure that individuals who want to be in a competitive employment and get fair wages are allowed to do those things.

Interviewer: Sounds like it's quite a collaborative effort on the part of your organization across those different programs to make sure the individual get the type of assistance that they need, tailored to their specific situation.

Lillie Lowe: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. It's a good thing that we have all these programs housed as the Protection and Advocacy for beneficiaries of Social Security is housed in the same building as all the other programs because we can collaborate. And as they come through our intake system, we ask quite a few questions to

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get the information that we need to understand which program can best help individuals along with our PABSS program.

Interviewer: Well that's a good segue to my next question. What are some of those standard questions that you might ask someone who is seeking protection and advocacy services?

Lillie Lowe: Well, if they're seeking our services of course we need to know that they do have a disability; we also need to know what type of services they are looking for. We will ask them those kinds of questions. We will ask them if they are receiving SSI or SSDI; we will ask them if they are looking to work in the community or if they are looking to do part-time work or if they are looking to work but still maintain their Medicaid or Medicare. All those kinds of questions will help us understand how to help the individual. If they are trying to work with a Vocational Rehabilitation program, and they want to put together a PASS plan or something like that, we also refer them to our CWICs in our state. And our Area Work Incentives Coordinator with SSA – works with us as well to help us figure out exactly we can provide and what sorts of things are available to our client.

Interviewer: So what are some of the common questions that you would hear from the beneficiaries themselves?

Lillie Lowe: Well, we would hear questions such as, "am I eligible for employment, you know can I go out to work? What kinds of services are available to me?" They ask questions about Employment Networks and how the Employment Networks work. They ask questions about the Work Incentives. Like, as I said, "Can I work and still have Medicare? Can I work and still have Medicaid?" Those kinds of questions. "Am I eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation services? How can I find out what kind of school I can attend, or if I can attend a college or a university? Or if I go to an Employment Network, do they have to assist me?" We answer those kinds of questions so they can have a clearer understanding of how these different systems work and their role in it and our role in obtaining employment for them.

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Interviewer: Well it sounds like your team has a heck of a job staying on top of all the nuances of the rules and regulations and laws that are involved in these situations.

Lillie Lowe: Yes, we do, we do, but it's very interesting program and it's very gratifying because we are able to help individuals and make sure that they understand their rights and they understand that they have a right to participate in the community and to be employed. And, as long as they are seeking employment and that they have a barrier to employment, our protection and advocacy program is ready and willing to help them.

Interviewer: One last question for the edification of our listeners. When you say you advocate for a disability beneficiary, what does it mean to advocate for them?

Lillie Lowe: Well, the way our system works is that we'll get a call from an individual or from an agency referring an individual, and once we speak to that individual, we will then get an understanding for what their situation is, if they're already working with another agency, we will advocate for them by contacting that agency and finding out what the concerns are of the agency, finding out what the concerns are of the individual that we're working with. And, we also help them, I want to say, we also help them to learn to advocate for themselves. And that's just means asking the right questions, finding exactly what you are entitled to and what you are eligible to receive. But we will work with the individual, and say that they have a counselor at another agency or another organization, we will kind of be the mediator to find out exactly what these individuals need and how they can go about obtaining the services they're looking for. So, advocacy can go just asking questions, doing an investigation; it can also be offering them legal services and helping them to understand their legal rights. So, it can range from – like I said – interviewing and investigating, to providing legal services for them.

Interviewer: Well it sounds like a wonderful resource for folks that might simply not know where to turn or what their opportunities or possibilities are.

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Lillie Lowe: Yes, a lot of times, that's just the issue. They don't really understand what's available there. Every organization works a little bit differently, so if they're working with one agency and they're referred to another agency, sometimes people feel like they're getting the run-around and they don't know exactly what to do, so a lot of times we'll just step in and try to kind of bring it all together so that there's a much clearer picture of the direction that the individual needs to follow.

Interviewer: So Lillie, can you give us a couple examples of types of cases that have come through your organization recently?

Lillie Lowe: Yeah, sure. We had cases that we've worked on where individuals were seeking services from an Employment Network and the Employment Network had offered to assist them with receiving transportation to employment. And the individual contacted us because it had been weeks that passed and the Employment Network had not provided them the funds or transportation funds, to get to the job – they were going to get a bus ticket. So the individual came to us because they were in jeopardy of losing their employment. So, we would contact the employment agency and speak to the agency about the delay, and tried to get them to respond in a timely manner. We were successful in getting the employment agency to provide the transportation cost for the individual. And the individual was just asking for this cost until they were able to work and obtain a paycheck, so then they would be able to get the bus pass on their own. So, the individual did come to us, as I said, and we were able to work with the individual and the Employment Network, so the Employment Network did provide the transportation funds until the individual was able to work about a month or two, and then able to provide their own transportation. Another type of case we've had – and we've had several of these – is when an individual will come to us about overpayment. And the overpayment was from work, of course – a work-related overpayment. So we were able to assist the individual by looking through their work history and seeing that the individual was not actually overpaid and we were able to contact Social Security and provide them with this information and they too then reviewed the individual's work history and noticed that and saw that the individual had not received an overpayment, so we were able then to have that work situation worked out for the individual.

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Interviewer: Well that sounds particularly critical because those overpayment situations can be fairly complex, so the individual doesn't know how to handle that but you guys are trained, your staff know what to look for and can go to bat for that person and get it all straightened out.

Lillie Lowe: Right, and we were able to request a reconsideration and provide all the information, and Social Security was actually pleased that we caught this and were able to bring it to their attention. We do a few cases like this, but it has to be a work-related overpayment and it has to be a barrier to employment. We just, it must be a barrier to employment before we take a case that is an overpayment case.

Interviewer: Right. Well that's great. Thank you for sharing those with us.

Lillie Lowe: Thank you so much.

Interviewer: If you think you may have been discriminated against because of your disability or want to learn more about your rights, a PABSS representative will be able to help you discuss you options. If you are thinking about returning to work or working for the first time, a PABSS can help you ensure that your legal rights are protected. PABSS can help you understand your rights and how to navigate reasonable accommodations including assistive technology, which can support you as you determine whether work is right for you and how it will affect your benefits. For more information about Ticket to Work or to locate a PABSS near you, visit www.socialsecurity.gov/work or call the Ticket to work Help Line at 1-866-968-7842 for voice or 1-866-833-2967 for TTY.

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