

Paying it Forward Jason's Story

"Where did I go? I want my old self back ... the one that had courage, a great job, a social life. I'm calling her... praying for the real me to return."

Jason read these words, posted by an anonymous writer with mental illness, and shuddered. He's been there. Bipolar disorder took hold when he was a young teen. He missed school, drank, and spent time in several group homes. No medication helped to calm the turbulence that characterized his youth. At the time, he could not have imagined that his future would bring a dream job, greater independence and pride. Jason just needed to find the right support to get there.

At 18, he began receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and considered where his life was headed without a diploma. Not liking the prospects, he struggled, and managed to earn a GED. By 2004, Jason found a good doctor with the right treatment plan, and his symptoms stabilized. Structure and productivity were part of this plan, and he found help at Nebraska's Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency.

The Journey Begins With a Ticket

Jason's VR counselor told him about Social Security's Ticket to Work program, available to recipients of Social Security disability benefits (ages 18 through 64). Through the Ticket program, Nebraska VR would provide Jason with free employment services to help him prepare for and find work. These services included career counseling; education and training; help with resume writing, interviews, and job leads. "Our staff takes pride in the work they do, and in the resulting success of clients", says Mark Schultz, Director of the state of Nebraska's VR agency.

"Ticket to Work worked for me! ,,"

Together, Jason and his VR counselor developed an Individualized Plan for Employment, a road map to help him reach his goals. "We agreed that going to school should be the first step. I enrolled in South East Community College", he says. "I fell in love with the Human Services program there, and graduated with an Associate's Degree in 2007."



With help from VR, Jason put together a resume and tightened his interview skills. He focused on the job hunt, spending his days in the agency's Job Search Center combing through leads. "You've got to buckle down and be serious about it", he acknowledges. "It was amazing what they offered! They helped me navigate through the entire job hunt. I got the support I needed and I'm grateful for that."

Jason was offered a job working as a Community Support Professional at Region Five Services, a local agency that helps adults with developmental disabilities integrate into the community. He would be able to put his life experience to work developing programs for independent living. The position seemed to be a good fit. However, Jason had many concerns about how work would affect his Social Security disability benefits. What if this job didn't work out? Would he lose the Medicaid and SSI benefits he relied on? Most people who become employed with help from their state VR agency find that VR services end approximately 90 days after they start working. Jason worried about what would happen after his case with VR closed and he was on his own. Given the unpredictable nature of his condition, he knew he would continue to need support to keep his job and earn a living.

With support from Ticket to Work, Nebraska VR and Easter Seals, Jason found his path to a better future. Find yours. To learn more, call the Ticket to Work Help Line at **1-866-968-7842 (V)** or **866-833-2967 (TTY/TDD)**, or visit **www.socialsecurity.gov/work**.

Partnership Plus: Support Beyond VR

Like Jason, many people with disabilities need ongoing support services that will allow them to remain employed and increase their earnings over time. That's why state vocational rehabilitation agencies often collaborate with service providers that can offer this support after a VR case closes. This arrangement, known as "Partnership Plus", gives Ticket program participants continued access to individualized employment services, should they need them. Mark Schultz of Nebraska VR explains:

“Partnership Plus is a way of offering our clients a continuum of support beyond our time-limited services. We have agreements with other providers who can address specific client needs with added supportive services. Our partners follow-up with clients after their case is closed to make sure things are going well [at work], and to provide whatever help is necessary so they don't lose that job.”

Jason's counselor told him that through the Ticket program, he would be able to receive free employment support services that would continue after he was on the job. These services, available through authorized providers known as Employment Networks (ENs), offer the help he might need to advance his career.

ENs and the Services They Offer

EN

Like state VR agencies, ENs offer employment services that help you prepare for and find work. Some also provide benefits counseling. Unlike most VR agencies, ENs also provide job retention services that can help you to stay employed. After you have found work, an EN can help you:

- Get Job Accommodations
- Communicate with your Employer
- Stay Organized
- Stay in touch with Social Security
- Report Earnings

“Partnering with ENs allows us to build off the strengths of other providers to offer better quality services and help our clients succeed”, says Schultz.

Partnership Plus sets people up for success by offering ongoing support at each step toward greater independence. Because Partnership Plus arrangements vary from state to state, VR counselors can explain how their partnerships with ENs work locally.



Partnership Plus Supports Each Step to Self-Sufficiency



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Passing the Torch

Jason's VR counselor put him in touch with Easter Seals of Nebraska, an EN that provided benefits counseling to help him gain a better understanding of the risks and rewards associated with employment.

"It's critical to have benefits counseling available so that people make informed decisions about working", says Schultz. "We don't have that expertise. Easter Seals does".

Nebraska state VR has a Partnership Plus agreement with Easter Seals. Soon after Jason's VR case closed, his VR counselor gave him suggestions on how to select an EN that would be equipped to meet his needs. Jason was pleased with the services available at Easter Seals, and he decided to work with them. Easter Seals was there to answer his lingering questions about disability benefits and work. They helped him stay organized and communicate with Social Security. With help from Easter Seals, Jason was able to focus on reaching his employment goals.

"Easter Seals became familiar with my case", he recalls. "They were there to answer my questions and if they didn't know the answer right away, they found it. All of my concerns about work were addressed."

Karen Goehring, Ticket to Work Coordinator at Easter Seals of Nebraska, adds: *"I think the Partnership Plus [arrangement] gave Jason reassurance that he would have someone he could talk to who is familiar with his case, and is in his corner. Having that ongoing support helped alleviate some of the anxiety he would have had without an advocate."*

Finding an EN



Your VR counselor may be able to help you find an EN that is a good fit. You can also visit www.choosework.net for tips on choosing the right EN. Use the "Find Help" feature to connect with providers who offer the services you need to start or advance your career.

Work Incentives

Rules called Work Incentives make it easier for adults with disabilities to enhance their job skills and gain experience, while receiving healthcare and some cash benefits. Jason was relieved to learn that if he has to stop working because of his disability within five years, Social Security may be able to start his benefits again without a new application. Each person's circumstances differ, and job-seekers are encouraged to consult a benefits counselor.

Paying it Forward

By 2009, Jason's employer gave him health insurance, and he earned enough money at work to no longer rely on Social Security benefits. He knows he has found the job he is meant to do.

"When you see the look on someone's face... when he knows he has accomplished something... that's worth a lot. I've been through the system as a consumer, and I know what it's like to struggle", he recalls. "My experiences have helped me connect with [our clients]."

Jason says it feels good to be more independent. Now a proud home-owner, he is grateful for the help he received along the way.

"I feel like I'm paying things forward. I had a support system that helped me, and I like providing support for others. I guess you never know what your dream job is going to be until you find it, and I really found mine! Ticket to Work worked for me."

