

# Arriving Home: Matt's Story

In 2014, Matt took stock of his life. He was receiving **Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI)** because hearing loss and other medical issues had interfered with consistent employment. For years he had struggled to make ends meet on an SSDI check. As an ambitious gentleman, he was eager to move beyond the limitations of relying on SSDI.

"I always wanted and planned to work," he says, "... to be productive, build a career, and earn more money..."

Matt was determined to have the choices that steady work affords, and he knew from intermittent experience in the workforce that he had valuable analytic, organization and spreadsheet skills to contribute. He also needed a lot of guidance and support as he considered his future.

During his years in high school, Matt learned from his guidance counselor that **state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies** promote programs that help people with disabilities go to work. He decided to reach out to his local VR agency for help and learned about an interesting opportunity.

## A Ticket to Work

The VR counselor explained to Matt that **Social Security's Ticket to Work (Ticket) program** would provide the comprehensive employment services he needed to navigate a job hunt. This voluntary program is set up to help people like Matt gain financial independence through work. Through the Ticket program, VR agencies and service providers known as **Employment Networks (EN)** offer a range of free services to help people prepare for, find and maintain employment. Some ENs specialize in serving specific



populations, such as job seekers who are deaf, while others offer certain types of services. **Recipients of Social Security disability benefits (ages 18 through 64) qualify.**

Matt's VR counselor began by connecting him with **Community Integrated Services (CIS)**, a Pennsylvania-based EN that would remain by his side through each step to employment and beyond. Matt worked with a job development team at CIS that included a career counselor, an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter, and a **Benefits Counselor**, a professional qualified to advise him about the impact that work would have on his disability benefits.

Matt and his career counselor worked first on an **Individual Work Plan (IWP)**, which is a roadmap for achieving his employment goals. They brought together what he had learned from past employment stints with a thorough assessment of his skills and interests. It became clear that flexibility, a positive attitude and a strong work ethic were among the assets Matt would bring to an employer. He also had a solid working knowledge of Microsoft Office applications, wanted to help people, learn new skills and work in an office. This information allowed the job development team at CIS to narrow the field of search.

## Reasonable accommodation

After helping with his resume, job leads and interview skills, Matt's career counselor prepared him for the next phase of his search. She advised him about **reasonable accommodations** and his legal rights under the **Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA)**.

**Reasonable accommodations** are changes to a job, work environment, work schedule or any other adjustment that makes it possible for an employee with a disability to perform a job for which he or she is qualified. For example, Matt's primary means of communication is by keyboard. Using email is the best way for him to share thoughts and ideas with coworkers and he will ask them to communicate with him primarily by email. In addition, Matt can read lips and one-on-one meetings are more productive than meetings with larger groups. Because large meetings can be difficult to follow, he needs an interpreter to facilitate his participation.

As a job seeker who is deaf and needs **accommodations**, Matt was uncertain about his prospects. At first, he was reluctant to ask for anything from a prospective employer right out of the gate. If employers knew he needed job accommodations like these, would it take him out of the running?



The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) requires employers to provide reasonable accommodation to qualified employees and applicants with disabilities, unless such accommodations would pose an undue hardship (e.g. too costly, too extensive, too substantial, too disruptive). In general, the applicant or employee with a disability is responsible for letting the employer

## Asking for accommodations during a job search

Accommodations can help you on your career path even before you've been hired. Knowing you are legally entitled to adjustments to the interview or application process is helpful. But speaking up and requesting accommodations can be anxiety-inducing for many people. Here are some tips for requesting reasonable accommodation from a prospective employer:

1. Consider your timing. Knowing when to **disclose** your disability and ask for accommodations is tricky. It's also a highly personal decision. Some people want to let recruiters know before an initial screening while others prefer to wait a little longer to disclose.
2. Ask questions about the hiring process. Don't be afraid to get the information you need so you know what to expect and can make an informed decision about when to disclose and what to ask for.
3. Be specific about your needs. It's up to you to be explicit about what you require in order to be your best self and to perform a job optimally.
4. Frame your request positively. Demonstrate that you're engaged and solution-oriented by first conveying your interest in the position, your desire to do your best throughout the hiring process and finally, by requesting one or more specific accommodations.
5. Know before the hiring process begins how much you are comfortable sharing. You don't need to disclose in detail. Share only what is relevant to your success on the job.

For more information about the ADA and Reasonable Accommodation, visit the **Job Accommodation Network** web site at <https://askjan.org>. Additional resources are available at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) web site at <https://www.eeoc.gov/>.

See **Job Applicants and the Americans with Disabilities Act**.

know that he or she needs accommodation to participate in the application process, to perform essential job functions, or to receive equal benefits and privileges of employment.

This means Matt could consider and request adjustments to a job and/or the application process. Together, Matt and his counselor identified those accommodations that are essential for him to perform office work and to demonstrate what he can offer during an application process. They agreed to an approach for disclosing his disability and requesting accommodations that made him more comfortable.

## Work Incentives

The next thing Matt needed as he started his job hunt was a better understanding of the impact employment would have on his SSDI and Medicare benefits. The Benefits Counselor at CIS educated him about Social Security "**Work Incentives**." These rules and programs make it easier for adults with disabilities to enhance their job skills while maintaining access to their benefits. Matt learned, for example, that his Medicare coverage would continue for more than 7 years after he begins full-time work, even if his earnings became too high for an SSDI payment. This Work Incentive, known as "**Medicare for Persons with Disabilities Who Work**," would allow him to pursue a career without worrying about his health care coverage. In addition, if Matt's disability interferes with work, there is a Work Incentive called "**Expedited Reinstatement**" that may allow him to return to benefits without a new application. Matt was grateful to find attentive professionals who explained **the rules** about Social Security benefits and employment. This made it easier for him to focus on achieving personal growth at work.

There are 20 different Work Incentives available to help people go to work. Because each person's circumstances are different, jobseekers are encouraged to consult a Benefits Counselor. These professionals (some of whom work **for Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) projects**) have specialized training that equip them to help people understand the effect employment will have on their Social Security disability benefits,

Medicaid and/or Medicare. To connect with a Benefits Counselor, call the Ticket to Work Help Line shown at the end of this feature.

## People in his corner

By the end of 2014, Matt was offered part-time work at a nonprofit that provides direct support to people with developmental disabilities. He served in a variety of capacities as an administrative assistant and the experience bolstered his collaborative problem-solving skills. Of equal importance was the growth in his self-confidence. It felt good to contribute.

The Ticket program is helpful to many people like Matt who would not otherwise have access to the ongoing support they need after receiving an offer letter. Keeping track of benefits and Social Security rules after employment begins can be overwhelming, and most people benefit from assistance. CIS continued to provide Matt with support while he was on the job, helping him comply with **wage reporting** rules, assisting with correspondence from Social Security, and troubleshooting as needed. The Ticket program also allowed Matt to receive job coaching so he could strengthen relationships with co-workers and progress to the next step in his career.

## Evolution

Matt had good relationships at work, but soon needed more responsibility than the job could offer. His connection to staff at CIS had grown strong throughout the year they worked together. Staff appreciated his skills and personal attributes. Matt knew they could provide the accommodations and work environment he needed for long-term employment success. When he expressed a desire for full-time work, it happened that a position in CIS' human resources (HR) office opened. In 2015, CIS offered him full-time work as a Human Resources Assistant, and he was delighted.

Matt's role at CIS evolved and he has since taken on more responsibility managing employee benefits and unemployment claims.

"We enjoy having Matt as a coworker," says Wendy Cowan, Director of CIS' HR Department. "He has done such a tremendous job with the whole unemployment process that we... almost had a perfect record in 2019. He became our go-to person for compliance items, one of the most important areas of responsibility because of the prospect of audits and fines."

By the end of 2015, Matthew had traded his SSDI benefit for a larger paycheck. He expresses satisfaction and gratitude for his work and the people who make it possible.

"I am in a supportive environment and position that work well for me," he says. "...It feels good to be productive and now I can afford things I could not have before."

Matt's work gives him the fulfillment and stability to continue building the future he envisions. In 2019, he purchased a home, an achievement that seemed so remote 4 years earlier. Feeling at home in the office and in his house has made Matt's life better. Ticket to Work made it possible. Matt made it happen.

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Ticket to Work and Work Incentives helped Matt find his path to a better future.

**Find yours!**

To learn more, call the Ticket to Work Help Line at **1-866-968-7842** or **1-866-833-2967** (TTY) Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. ET, or visit **[choosework.ssa.gov](https://www.choosework.ssa.gov)**.



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