

# Wingman Angel's Story

Angel lay in bed, preparing himself to begin another day in painful slow motion. He rolled on his side, gingerly placed both feet on the floor and pushed himself upright. "It took me hours to get going in the morning," he recalls. "I was in constant pain. I couldn't sit up, bend down, stand or drive for long periods of time."

It was 2012 when it became clear that injuries sustained during his 2 tours of duty with the U.S. Air Force would end his military career. The punishing physical work that goes with war simulation exercises caused debilitating medical conditions that multiplied as he continued his work in the Air Force. Medical tests revealed extensive damage to the vertebrae in Angel's back and neck, joints, bones, nerves and muscles. He would need to have multiple surgeries.

"...I wanted to... serve my country," he says, reflecting on the circumstances that led to the end of his military service. Angel was glad to be reunited with his family but he was not happy to have his career cut short by daily joint and back pain. "I was just 30 years old and could no longer move or work as I had once done. I fell into a deep depression," he says. "It was a dark period in my life."

## Civilian warrior

The Air Force issued a medical retirement for Angel, and he moved back to Puerto Rico to be with his growing family. As part of his medical discharge from military service, Angel had a series of meetings with a counselor at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). He learned that he would receive a monthly compensation check for injuries sustained while



...serving. Because he is a **Wounded Warrior**, Angel was also eligible for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), which he began receiving at the end of 2012.

These and other benefits through the VA allowed Angel to focus on recovery, and he pursued treatment with determination. Between 2012 and 2016, Angel consulted orthopedic surgeons, occupational and physical therapists, a rheumatologist, pain management specialists and a neurosurgeon to overcome the mobility-restricting effects of his arthritis and musculoskeletal injuries. He had 2 surgeries and worked hard in a consistent program of rehabilitation while helping to raise his 2 young sons.

In 2016, when Angel's health took an unexpected turn for the worse, he went to the doctor and was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. "I thought that was the end," he recalls. "I was overwhelmed by the weight of disability and illness."

In April of 2016, he had another surgery and went through radiation and chemotherapy. He was fortunate to receive quality treatment for all his conditions and began to feel better by the end of the year.

## Opportunity arises

In 2017, as longer stretches of improved health and pain relief gave him time to think about the future, Angel considered his next move. "I was a young man with a family to support," he says, "... and I was not ready to give up on the workforce. But my medical conditions are chronic. Flare-ups are unpredictable and could interfere with work."

As Angel looked into employment options, 2 valuable pieces of information crossed his path. He learned that his friend's employer, a Virginia-based federal contractor, was looking to hire information technology (IT) professionals. Angel had an IT background and inquired with human resources at the firm. "From there, things happened pretty quickly," he recalls.

During the interview process, Angel learned that because of **Section 503** of the Rehabilitation Act, federal contractors take affirmative action to increase the number of people with disabilities that they employ. Angel's disability, which he worried would be a barrier to suitable employment, turned into an asset for an employer seeking qualified professionals in compliance with Section 503.

"They offered me a position as Program Operations Manager, managing IT assets for the Department of Defense (DOD)!"

Angel and his family were both pleased and concerned about the prospect of his employment in the civilian workforce. He was eager to work, but apprehensive about whether his health would interfere, and unsure about what full-time employment would mean for his disability benefits.

## Angel's Ticket to Work

While Angel was exploring job prospects, he also received information in the mail about Social Security's **Ticket to Work** (Ticket) program. The Ticket program is a free and voluntary program that supports career development for people with disabilities who are ready for employment.



Social Security's Ticket to Work program

## Wounded Warriors

If you're a veteran with a service-related injury or disability, Social Security makes allowances for you to receive both Social Security disability benefits and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability benefits simultaneously. In fact, Social Security will expedite claims for military service members who have become disabled while actively serving on or after October 1, 2001, regardless of where your disability occurred. For more information about Disability Benefits for Wounded Warriors, see:

[www.ssa.gov/pubs/EN-05-10030.pdf](http://www.ssa.gov/pubs/EN-05-10030.pdf)

## Employment Resources

If you are a veteran of the United States armed forces, and looking for work, there are several good places to begin your search. Learn more: [choosework.ssa.gov/library/ticket-to-work-for-americas-veterans](http://choosework.ssa.gov/library/ticket-to-work-for-americas-veterans)



**Adults ages 18 through 64 who receive Social Security disability benefits (SSI/SSDI) qualify.** Through the Ticket program, service providers, known as Employment Networks (EN) and State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies, offer a range of free support services to help people prepare for, find, or maintain employment. Some ENs serve people with a specific type of disability; others offer certain types of services. The program is set up to help people progress toward financial independence.

After calling the Ticket to Work Help Line to learn more, Angel connected with **The Choice Group** – a Virginia-based EN that would help him navigate his transition to the civilian workforce. With help from counselors at the VA and **Benefits Counselors** at The Choice Group, Angel gained a better understanding of his disability benefits, and the impact that employment would have on them.

He learned about Social Security **Work Incentives**, which make it easier for adults with disabilities to explore work and still receive Medicare or Medicaid and, in some cases, cash payments from Social Security. Angel felt at ease knowing he was not going to immediately lose his benefits when he returned to work. He would have time to determine how full-time employment would work for him.

## About Section 503

Federal contractors are organizations hired to provide goods and services to (or on behalf of) the federal government. Under Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act, businesses with 50 or more employees and \$50,000+ in federal contracts must take affirmative action to increase the number of people with disabilities that they employ. The rule encourages federal contractors to have at least 7% of their talent represented by qualified individuals with disabilities!

## Employers may ask you to disclose a disability. But disclosure is voluntary.

To track their progress, federal contractors are allowed to invite job applicants and current employees to self-identify as an individual with a disability, both during the application process and after a job offer is made. If the employer invites applicants to self-identify, they must also state clearly that the information they are asking for is:

- used only in connection with affirmative action efforts
- kept confidential
- not a requirement, and refusal to provide it will not subject the applicant to any adverse treatment

Read more about Section 503 and working for a federal contractor at [choosework.ssa.gov/Assets/uploads/files/FAQ-Section-503.pdf](https://choosework.ssa.gov/Assets/uploads/files/FAQ-Section-503.pdf)

There are more than 20 Work Incentives designed to ease the transition to work. Because each person's circumstances are different, people who want to explore employment are encouraged to connect with a **Benefits Counselor**, a trained professional who can explain what employment would mean for their Social Security disability benefits as well as other federal and state entitlements.

Angel is grateful for the support and encouragement his EN provides. **The Choice Group** gave him guidance about disclosing his disabilities and the best way to ask for **reasonable accommodations**.

"[We talked about] the best way to request... ergonomic furniture, shorter shifts and a flexible work schedule," he says. "My EN helped me understand the rules connected with participating in Ticket to Work, and they continue to assist in my communication with Social Security. The Choice Group has been a tremendous advocate. They played a big role in my decision to get back out there, and ultimately, in setting me up for success at work!"

## Serving once more

Angel is happy with his job as a DOD contractor, where he is working with military peers once again. He says it gives him the gratifying feeling that he is serving once more. The transition from military work to the civilian workforce also helped him discover many personal and professional attributes that his military experience helped cultivate. Angel's employer values his work ethic, his quick problem-solving skills, and his ability to work well as part of a team.

"Being back at work has had a positive impact in so many areas of my life," he reflects. "I've been able to [show] my children the rewards that can go with perseverance and resilience. The job has helped me build confidence, maintain good mental health, and regain a sense of accomplishment... all vital for the next chapter in our lives. We purchased our first home just in time for the arrival of our daughter."



## Work Incentives Helped Angel Feel Better About Going Back to Work



Angel learned he would be able to test his ability to work during a 9-month **Trial Work Period (TWP)**,

while still receiving cash benefits from Social Security. After the TWP ends, a 36-month **Extended Period of Eligibility (EPE)** begins. During the EPE, most people with a disabling impairment get benefits for the months in which they earn less than \$1,220 (Social Security's definition of **Substantial Gainful Activity** or SGA for 2019).



Angel was particularly relieved when he learned about a Work Incentive called **Expedited Reinstatement (EXR)**. With EXR, Social Security may re-start his benefits without a new application, if he needs to stop work because of his disability within 5 years of his termination of benefits. Angel felt better about entering the civilian workforce knowing he would have time to settle into his job without fear of losing his benefits.

Learn more about different Work Incentives by reading the **Red Book**, Social Security's guide to Work Incentives at [www.SSA.gov/redbook](http://www.SSA.gov/redbook). You can also register for a free **Work Incentives Seminar Event (WISE)** at [choosework.ssa.gov/wise](http://choosework.ssa.gov/wise).



"My wife has been supportive and caring throughout these difficult years, and it gives me peace to know that I can now support my family in more ways than I was able to before," he continues. "My family and the people I met through Ticket to Work believed in me at a time when I was unsure of myself and the future. With their support, I've been able to focus on getting better, getting to work, and getting the word out to other vets: Help is out there for you when you are ready for work."



"So many veterans struggle after their service has ended. In the Air Force, your wingman is by your side as you face uncertainty... and on duty, you never leave another service member behind. In a way, the Ticket to Work program brings the wingman concept into the civilian workforce. They are by my side, and I'm grateful for that as I look ahead."

The Ticket to Work program helped Angel 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), or visit [choosework.ssa.gov](http://choosework.ssa.gov).



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Social Security's Ticket to Work program