

Ticket Talk



Podcast Transcript

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Ticket Talk Podcast: Reflecting on the Anniversary of Ticket to Work and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

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: Since 1999, Ticket to Work has helped thousands of Social Security Disability Insurance or SSDI and Supplemental Security Income or SSI beneficiaries explore employment options. Through this program people with disabilities continued to get help in finding meaningful jobs and move forward towards financial independence. The journey is not easy, but with help from the Ticket to Work program, work incentives, and other federal programs and resources, you can find options for work that may fit your situation. Today we're speaking with Billy Wright, a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps, who was paralyzed in a car accident after his time in the military.

Billy transitioned into the civilian workforce before the Ticket to Work program was established. As we commemorate the program's 15th anniversary, Billy reflects on the challenges people with disabilities assume when looking to reenter the workforce, both before and after the Ticket to Work program launched. Today, Billy serves as the National Program Manager for the Disabled Veterans Affirmative Action Program at the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (VA). He has turned the challenges he has experienced into lessons that can help people with disabilities advance their careers. Billy, we're honored to have you here. Thank you for joining us.

Billy: Yes, and thank you.

Interviewer: Like many of our listeners, you received SSDI benefits after sustaining a serious injury. Can you tell our listeners what you went through when you learned that you had a serious injury?

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Billy: When I learned about the nature of my injury, the doctors were pretty much saying some things that was sort of a surprise to me. Basically, you prepared to receive welfare or you were going to be on disability for the rest of your life. And I was shocked to hear someone tell me that, but that was basically the misconceptions of even folks in the medical field at that time. When I learned about the nature of my injury, there wasn't any much to look forward to out there. I was told that because of my condition there wasn't the possibility of me ever walking again.

Interviewer: Why was returning to work so important to you?

Billy: Returning to work was so important to me and also my family. Generally when something like this happens, if you're doing well, generally your family is doing well. You go to a cook out and everyone asks you how you or your family has been. For instance, someone might ask, "Hey Billy how's everything going?"

And you may say, "Hey, I'm looking for a job."

And then a whole other year will go by and you have a family cookout again the next summer, and get asked, "Hey Billy, how's everything going?"

And I would say, "Well, I'm looking for a job."

And they'd say, "So, that was the same thing you said last year..."

So definitely, it was very important for me to get back into the mainstream. I felt like I wasn't doing anything and that I wasn't in life. I was just there, so that was a lot of incentive for me to return to work and just start off to see what would happen.

Interviewer: Would you mind telling us about some of your concerns you had about going back to work?

Billy: This is before Ticket to Work, we all had the fear, you know, if you went back to work, the chances would be that you would lose your benefits. And that was definitely a concern.

Interviewer: Where did you go for help and what kind of support did you receive?

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Billy: Well, I was referred to a social worker who helped me with getting my wheel chair and housing and those types of things, some of the necessities that I needed. And then from there I went to seek help from State Vocational Rehabilitation, for Washington, D.C. and the state of Maryland.

Interviewer: Can you please describe for our listeners your role at the VA and the type of work you do?

Billy: Yes, my role at the VA is the National Program Manager for the Department of Veteran Affairs Disabled Veterans Affirmative Action Program. I'm responsible for working with each of the administrations – that's the Veterans Business Association, the National Cemetery Administration, the Veterans Health Care Administration, and their staff offices to develop their strategic plan on what we're doing to recruit and advance disabled vets throughout VA. I also travel a lot. I partner with Veterans Services Organizations and other organizations that provide services for disability employment that support wounded warriors.

Interviewer: The Ticket to Work Program didn't exist when you had your injury. But now that it does, and has been in place for 15 years, can you tell us how things have changed?

Billy: Prior to Ticket [to Work], the fear of losing the only benefits that you had, was far greater than taking a chance to go and work. A lot of us weren't sure physically if we were able to work a full, eight-hour day. There was no trial period if you left and got hired and started work. That was the fear.

Or, what if something went wrong, you had nothing to go back to other than to reapply. And that was very risky, because you've already proven that you're able to work, so the appeal process and going through that.

Having Ticket [to Work] now, it's great because now, you don't have that fear. If you'd like to give work an opportunity you have the opportunity to do that, to work. It's just unbelievable, the folks I've met that have used their ticket to get employed and have gone on and have had careers. It's like night and day.

When I got injured, you had to physically go to a Social Security office, in order to receive services, or using the mail, and that was also a barrier depending on where you live, even if you mail letters out you didn't have transportation. A lot of things, even before the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the curb cuts and accessibility wasn't like what it is today. Definitely with having online services, you can

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apply and do a lot of things online. Honestly, yes, we did have an 800-number where you could call to get information, but it really put people with disabilities on the same playing field. Now you're able to get services online, and apply for the services that you need versus actually traveling to that office or facing the challenges of getting transportation.

Interviewer: Twenty-five years ago, through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), people with disabilities became protected by law against discrimination. The law also assures equal opportunity for people with disabilities in the work place. In honor of the 25th anniversary of the ADA, can you reflect on how the Ticket to Work program and Work Incentives have improved opportunities for people with disabilities in the work force?

Billy: Oh yeah, absolutely. It went hand in hand. Work Incentives were a great idea because now you've solved a problem with people with disabilities being protected by the law against discrimination. And not only that, now you have people with disabilities such as myself who were sitting at home and afraid to go to work, Ticket [to Work] allowed them to have an opportunity to have that work experience and those Work Incentives. And that was a tie in of how signing the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Ticket to Work program really did a great thing for all of us. Those who were receiving Social Security Disability Insurance or Supplemental Security Income, did have an opportunity to go to work, and not only that, were also protected.

Interviewer: Billy, how has employment made a difference in your life?

Billy: Employment has made a big difference in my life. Before employment, I felt like I wasn't in the mainstream. I would wake up every day and just watch TV. I had nothing to look forward to. If someone called me and asked me, "Hey, Billy what's going on," basically I had nothing to say because I wasn't doing anything.

So if it wasn't for having a job, I would never have known what it would be like to be a homeowner. If it wasn't for having a job, I wouldn't have a car and wouldn't be able to afford to get around. I met my wife at work, so it was more than just a job. It gave me a life. It put me back into the mainstream as far as being self-sufficient and being a role model in the community and all those things that you want to do. The job is what lit the fire to initiate all the other things that came behind it, that followed it. It was more than a job, it was a life.

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Interviewer: That's great. Do you have any other advice that you'd like to offer to our listeners?

Billy: Yes – definitely don't give up. The work experience, as I mentioned, did so much for me. Having a job gave me a life. Which kick-started everything from being a home owner, to meeting my wife, to being able to afford transportation and you know, take my niece and nephews out and buy them gifts for Christmas. You know, just overall, improvement of life. I was no longer looked at as Uncle Billy in the family that couldn't afford to buy anyone anything. Now when my niece and nephews see Uncle Billy they can say, "Hey, Uncle Billy bought me a Christmas gift, or a birthday gift, or he took us out on a vacation!" Those things would have never happened without having a job.

Interviewer: Billy thanks again for speaking with us today. We really appreciate sharing your advice with us and our listeners. Thank you again.

Billy: Thank you very much. I appreciate it and the opportunity.

Interviewer: The transition to employment can be challenging, but can also be rewarding. Social Security's Ticket to Work program and Work Incentives are here to help you on your path to employment. For more information about Ticket to Work or help locating a service provider visit www.choosework.net, or call the Ticket to Work Help Line at 1-866-968-7842 for voice, or 1-866-833-2967 for TTY.