

Onward and Upward David's Story

Ticket to Work Program Success Stories



Raised by a single mother, David had always been a hard worker. He went above and beyond on the job to earn money and help his family and others in the community. He had always balanced work and school as a teenager, and he worked hard after graduating from high school with the hope of one day being a surgical technologist.

While taking classes at the local community college, David found a job driving a tow truck. He needed a flexible work schedule to pursue his studies and reach his health career goals.

Late one night, David's life changed while responding to a service call. The car he was fueling and jump-starting was rear-ended at a high speed by a drunk driver, pinning David between the car and the truck. His body was crushed and both legs were severed just above the knee.

David's injuries, subsequent dual leg amputation surgery, rehabilitation, pain management, additional surgeries and depression kept him out of work for eight years. He tried to stay positive through all of it, making friends with others in the rehabilitation facility and finding ways to help them heal and get stronger while recovering himself. David did not enjoy being out of work but knew he needed time to heal, recover and learn a new way of life with a difference in mobility.

"I didn't recognize myself anymore. I had to learn how to be who I was again."

Rebuilding his life

Eventually David moved his family from California to Arizona to be in a more affordable community and closer to his brother.

After eight years of unemployment and receiving Social Security disability benefits, David knew that going back to work would help him move forward. He wanted to contribute to the well-being and security of his family. In September 2011, David met an **Ability360** staff member at a job fair and decided to participate in the Ticket to Work (Ticket) program.

"There are people who really need Social Security benefits, and I did until I was well enough to work," says David. "But I didn't want to continue to rely on the system. I wanted to work."

The team at Ability360 worked with David on his resumé and helped him with benefits counseling. They also coached him on his interview skills, teaching him to talk about his past job experience and desire to work rather than focusing on the story of his accident.

In December 2011, David interviewed for and got a job with Aqua Science, a water-misting and solar-heated pool company, where he scheduled appointments for customers and the Aqua Science staff. He still hoped to work in the healthcare field one day, but he was happy to be working again. He knew he could learn a lot, work hard and get promoted.

“Hiring someone with a disability is a challenge for some companies, knowing they may have to make some changes for you to be able to do a job or work in their office. But finding this job and this company through Ticket to Work meant that my company knew I was coming to them with a disability, and that I might have to ask for things every now and then. And they’ve been amazing.”

After five months in that job, he was promoted to a customer service position. He felt like he belonged. His employer treated him well, especially with regard to his disability, and worked with him to accommodate his mobility needs within the workplace.

David continued to be a top performer and, over time, worked his way up to his current position as the Operations Coordinator/Project Manager at Aqua Science. He works directly with the sales and service teams, makes sure his drivers and technicians know where they need to be every day, and ensures the teams deliver the best customer service possible. He is the only English and Spanish bilingual employee at the company, which is a huge benefit to his employer.

ABILITY360

Ability360 (formerly known as Arizona Bridge to Independent Living) advocates personal responsibility by and for people with disabilities to achieve independence. To help consumers become self-sufficient, Ability360 offers comprehensive programs including:

- Independent living skills instruction
- Information and referral
- Peer support
- Advocacy
- Home modification
- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) training and counsel
- Outreach to rehabilitation centers and early intervention for newly disabled individuals
- Reintegration from nursing homes
- Employment services
- Social Security Work Incentives consulting
- Empowering youth in transition
- Socialization through recreation

Ability360 is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation. Through its comprehensive programs, Ability360 touches the lives of people with disabilities and addresses the disability concerns of their family members, co-workers and employers.



“Signing up for Ticket to Work is the best decision I’ve ever made,” said David. “I always knew I wanted to do something more and now that I have a job, I can keep building on this and keep helping people. Nothing worth having is ever easy, but you have to start somewhere.”

Benefits that work

Ability360 explained to David that Social Security rules called Work Incentives make it easier for those who receive disability benefits to explore work and continue to receive healthcare (Medicaid or Medicare) and their Social Security cash benefits for a time.

Because David received Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits, he would be able to test his ability to work during a nine-month Trial Work Period (TWP) while still receiving benefits. After his TWP ended, a 36-month Extended Period of Eligibility (EPE) would begin. During the EPE, most people with a disabling impairment get benefits for all months in which they earn less than \$1,170, Social Security’s definition of Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA) in 2016. Learn more about SGA on page 5.

David felt confident about his job because he knew he would not immediately lose his healthcare coverage and SSDI benefits.

“Ticket to Work took away the fear of what could have happened if I took a job and it didn’t work out. I learned I could make it a transition, and that made me feel more confident.”

David also felt supported knowing that as long as he made progress toward his employment goals, according to Social Security’s timeline, Social Security would not conduct a medical Continuing Disability Review (CDR) to decide if he continued to qualify for disability benefits.

Trial Work Period (TWP)

SSDI recipients only



The TWP allows you to test your ability to work for at least nine months. During your TWP, you will receive full SSDI benefits no matter how much you earn as long as your work activity is reported and you have a disabling impairment.

Expedited Reinstatement (EXR)

SSDI and SSI recipients



If your benefits stopped because of your earnings level, and you are no longer able to work because of your medical condition or one related to it, you can ask to have your benefits reinstated without having to complete a new application. While Social Security determines your benefits reinstatement, you are eligible to receive temporary benefits for up to six months.

Protection from Medical Continuing Disability Reviews (CDR)

SSDI and SSI recipients



If you assign your Ticket to an approved service provider before you receive notice of a medical CDR, you will not have to undergo the medical review while you are participating in the Ticket program and making progress within Social Security’s timeframes.

About Ticket to Work

Social Security's Ticket to Work (Ticket) program supports career development for people ages 18 through 64 who receive Social Security disability benefits (SSI or SSDI) and want to work. The Ticket program is free and voluntary. It helps people with disabilities move toward financial independence and connects them with the services and support they need to succeed in the workforce.

Through the Ticket program, State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies and employment support service providers known as Employment Networks (EN) offer free support services to help people prepare for, find or maintain employment. To find a provider that can meet your needs, call the Ticket to Work Help Line number at the end of this story or use the online Ticket to Work **Find Help** tool.

David values the post-employment support he receives from Ability360. He can call them with questions at any time and considers them part of his family.

Every Ticket program participant's circumstances differ. Social Security beneficiaries are encouraged to begin their journey with a trained Benefits Counselor who can help them understand how employment will affect their disability benefits. Benefits Counselors can be found at community-based organizations called Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) projects and at some ENs.

Inspiring others

After totally replacing his Social Security cash benefits with earnings from work for 36 months, David completed the Ticket program on December 31, 2015. He has maintained regular contact with the team at Ability360, and has helped inspire others just beginning their employment journey through the Ticket program. He's been such a positive, motivating force that he won the 2015 Spirit of Ability360 Employment Achievement Award!

"Ticket to Work is a blessing. The accident only took away my legs, it didn't take away who I really am. Ticket to Work has given me back my life, and working allows me to take care of my children and my family. If you want to find work, you can. Just get out there and find out what you can really do!"

Currently using a wheelchair to get around, David has started a new physical therapy regimen and is now exploring the possibility of prosthetics to broaden his mobility.

“Don’t let fear hold you back ... all you need is one ‘Yes,’” says David. “You might think you’re going to hear a lot of ‘No’s,’ but all it takes is that one person who says, ‘Yes, you’re hired’ to make you realize you’re ready to do this and excel and be great. And that’s what Ticket to Work is here for, to help you get past the fear, manage your benefits, give you support, and help you get out there and become part of a great work team!”

The Ticket to Work program helped David find his path to a better future.

Find yours! To learn more, visit www.ssa.gov/work and contact 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. Ask a representative to send you a list of service providers or find providers on your own with the Ticket to Work **Find Help** tool.



What is SGA?

The term **Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA)** describes a level of work activity and earnings. Work is “substantial” if it involves doing significant physical or mental activities or a combination of both.

If you earn more than a certain amount and are doing productive work, Social Security generally considers that you are engaging in SGA. You would **not** be eligible for disability benefits.

Social Security also defines SGA in connection with earning a specific level of income per month. The SGA level changes every year. The SGA for the year in which this story was written was \$1,170 per month, or \$1,950 for individuals who are blind. For more information on SGA, please refer to **Social Security’s Redbook**, call Social Security at **1-800-772-1213** (TTY 1-800-325-0778), or contact your local **Social Security office**.