

Research Report:

**Survey of Participants in the
Utah Benefits Planning Coalition**

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Introduction

The Social Security Administration (SSA), as part of implementing Ticket to Work and the Work Incentives Improvement Act (TWWIIA) of 1999, awarded cooperative agreements to organizations in every state in the nation to develop Benefits Planning Assistance and Outreach (BPAO) projects. The purpose of the BPAO projects is to provide Social Security beneficiaries with disabilities access to benefits planning and assistance services, with the goal of providing them information on how work will affect their Social Security disability benefits, as well as other federal, state, and community supports they receive. This information will enable them to make an informed choice about going to work or increasing their income. As a result, these services are one component of improving employment preparation and thereby reducing dependency on cash benefits, a purpose of TWWIIA. Utah's BPAO project began in October 2000.

UBPAO services are provided via several sources. First there are three SSA-trained Benefits Specialists employed by the Utah State Office of Rehabilitation (USOR). In addition, there is a pool of benefits planners who are available to provide services. The planners have been trained by SSA but are employed by various organizations throughout the state. These planners form the Utah Benefits Planning Coalition (BPC). Finally, Margot Dana, the Technical Assistance Specialist employed by USOR, coordinates the benefit planners' training, provides them with technical assistance, and provides benefits planning services to a limited number of clients. The first set of Benefits Planners was trained in June 2003 with 25 participants from rural and urban areas.

The purpose of this report is to summarize the methodology and synthesize the results of a telephone survey of BPC planners, as well as provide recommendations for further training and development of the program. The survey outcomes are outlined in three sections. Section One seeks to answer the question of how often, and in what form, benefits planning assistance is being provided to consumers. Section Two

provides feedback from survey participants on last year's BPAO training. Finally, Section Three presents the suggestions from BPC participants for program improvement. Finally, recommendations from the findings are made.

Methods

Kathy Daley, Benefits Planning Manager, e-mailed training participants on September 9, 2004 informing them that a training for new Benefits Planners was scheduled for October 2004 and that their feedback would be useful for planning purposes. The e-mail stated that they would be contacted by a member of the University of Utah evaluation team for a telephone interview that would last about 15 minutes. Members were notified that participation was voluntary and that the information would be kept confidential.

During the next month telephone surveys were completed with 21 of the 25 individuals who participated in the 2003 training. Surveys were conducted by Carenlee Barkdull and Jeff Sheen of Utah State University and Sara McCormick of the University of Utah. The four remaining members were contacted but could not be reached. A copy of the survey instrument is attached. Interview summaries were e-mailed to Hank Liese, the lead evaluation team member on this project, and to the Center for Public Policy and Administration at the University of Utah for analysis.

Findings

Section One

1. How often, and in what form, is assistance being provided to recipients?

The BPAO program divides its services into five categories from the most basic to more complex. Listed from basic to most complex, they are:

- Information and Referral
- Problem Solving and Advocacy
- Benefits Analysis and Advisement
- Benefits Support Planning, and

- Benefits Management

Respondents were asked how they would describe the benefits planning services they provide in a typical week. Almost all of the survey respondents report providing customers with information and referral services. This includes answering general questions regarding eligibility, benefits, and work incentives, as well as providing referrals. Two of the 21 respondents report they do not currently provide any services and have turned over the responsibility to someone else in their office. Of the remaining 19 respondents, 14 (74%) state that Information and Referral is the only level of service provided. Two (11%) report providing problem solving and advocacy including gathering information about a consumer’s situation and specific issues. Two respondents (11%) report providing benefits analysis and advisement, which includes a written benefits analysis discussing the impact of employment on benefits. Finally, one respondent (4%) (5%) reports providing benefits support planning going beyond the written analysis and helping consumers with Impairment Related Work Expense (IRWE) plans and interfacing with Social Security. No one reported providing benefits management services.

Next, respondents were asked how much time they spend doing benefits analysis in a typical week. The majority of respondents report spending an average of 0-5 hours in a typical week doing benefits planning. However, some participants stated either benefits planning is part of their daily work duties (n=1) or that they have only served 4-5 people throughout the past year (n=1). One respondent reports that the amount of time he/she spends in a typical week depends on the nature of the cases. The following table shows the amount of time spent on benefits planning for the remaining respondents (n=17):

Table 1: Hours per week spent on benefits analysis

Hours / week	0-5	6-11	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40
# Respondents	9 (53.5%)	2 (11.8%)	2 (12%)	1 (5.9%)	2 (11.8%)	0	0	1 (5.9%)

Respondents were then asked if they have prepared a written benefits analysis for a consumer. The majority of trainees reported that they have. While most respondents simply answered “yes” or “no” to the question, some provided more detail, such as only providing 4-5 written analyses in the past year or only completing one. One respondent reported that he/she does not use the forms that were given. The following table shows how many respondents reported having ever prepared a written benefits analysis for a consumer (n=21):

Table 2: Respondents stating they have prepared a written analysis

Yes	No
16 (76%)	5 (24%)

Respondents were asked whether they typically verify a consumer’s benefits through a BPQY request to Social Security or not. The following table shows their responses to this question (n=20) [where is the other 1?](#):

Table 3: Respondents typically requesting a BPQY

Yes	No
14 (70%)	6 (30%)

If they answered “no,” they were asked if they had *ever* requested a BPQY. Of those who do not typically request a BPQY, five also stated that they have *never* requested a BPQY. One respondent said that he/she gets lost in the shuffle at Social Security and just calls a contact directly to get questions answered.

Respondents were then asked if they are able to provide benefits planning services to everyone who requests it. Following is a table showing responses to this question (n=21):

Table 4: Respondents who are able to meet all benefits planning requests

Yes	No
14 (70% 67%)	7 (30% 33%)

Those who answered “no” were asked what their agency would need in order to meet all the requests for benefits planning services. One respondent indicated that “no one has requested” benefits planning services and noted that his/her agency “has not advertised” these services. But this same individual said that, to meet demand, his/her

agency would need “more time and training.” Regarding the time issue, one participant said, “My boss only wants me to spend 6 hours a weeks on benefits planning,” and another said that his/her work hours “do not allow a lot of time to do benefits planning.” Other agency-related responses to being able to meet the demand for benefits planning services were “more staff” and “marketing help.” One participant said he/she has received requests for benefits planning from people not eligible for the agency’s services, and added, “Someone in my geographic area that could work with all or a broader pool of clients would be great.”

Section Two

2. Is the BPAO training useful?

Survey participants were asked how prepared they felt they were to provide benefits planning services following the five-day training and two-day follow-up training in 2003. Responses below are categorized by level of confidence expressed (n=20) [where does 20 come from?](#):

Table 5: Confidence level of respondents in providing planning services, post 5-day and 2-day training. 20 is denominator

Confident/Prepared	Somewhat Confident/Prepared	Not Confident/Prepared
9 (43%) 45%	8 (38%) 40%	3 (14%) 15%

One respondent noted that he/she would be attending the training in October 2004.

Several respondents had additional comments regarding this question. Some respondents complimented the training and pointed out that there is a lot of information to learn, and if it isn’t used routinely their knowledge fades. However, some stated they were not hesitant to call with questions and one stated he/she uses the training manual constantly. Another respondent noted that the training provided a great database of information to use, but the framework for using the information was weak. Several respondents pointed out the high quality of Margot’s [first mention?](#) work and several would like more time with Margot one-on-one.

Respondents were asked if they attended any of the monthly or quarterly trainings arranged by Margot Dana. Nineteen (90%) stated that yes, they had attended

additional trainings. Two (10%) stated that they had not. Those who responded affirmatively were asked if they felt more prepared to provide benefits planning services after the trainings. Fifteen (79%) said they did. Four (21%) answered slightly differently as indicated below:

- "I don't know...I understand the basics, but [with some of the details] I just felt inadequate..."
- "Yes and no. Yes because some of the information is applicable to everyone overall. No because some of the information is a review or not applicable to everyone."
- "Some were helpful."
- "In most cases; the written material was valuable."

Respondents were then asked if they thought any of the trainings should be required and why or why not. Fourteen (74%)[67%](#) said the trainings should be required, and several pointed to the fact that situations vary and additional training is helpful to understanding the different issues. Some felt that quarterly trainings would be more beneficial than monthly trainings. Four respondents (21%)[19%](#) did not think it necessary to make the trainings a requirement with two of those stating that additional compensation should accompany any required trainings. The other three responses (15%) [14%](#) either stated mandatory trainings should depend on the person's role or there was no answer recorded.

Next, respondents were asked how likely they would be to attend additional in-depth trainings on various topics in the future, either provided through Margot Dana or someone else, e.g., Social Security. Fourteen respondents (67%) stated they would very likely attend additional trainings. Several others stated concerns of frequency, length, geographic location of trainings, time constraints and cost as the main reasons for not attending additional trainings. Once again, some respondents preferred quarterly over monthly trainings. Training content was also specified as a concern with several respondents stating they would likely attend if the topic was applicable and interesting.

The final question related to training asked respondents for their advice or ideas for what could help those attending the October training. All but one of the respondents offered some sort of advice or presented ideas. Basically, there were five areas mentioned: planning, content, follow-up, logistics, and other advice.

Planning

Planning is split into two parts: trainer preparation and trainee preparation. For the trainer, several respondents suggested that materials be sent out beforehand including an acronym sheet (not everyone knows what IRWE stands for) and other material, e.g., an outline of topics to be discussed and some basic information about SSI/SSDI. For the trainees, it was suggested that they review the material before arriving at the training and also that they bring specific examples of benefits planning situations.

Content

Several respondents suggested including more hands-on activities in the training, including more visuals and take-home examples.

Follow-up

Quite a few respondents suggested that trainees practice what they learn immediately following the training. Several methods were offered for doing this, including observing the trainer and being observed by the trainer. Most suggested, however, that providing a written benefits analysis be role-played with someone else in their office. The key point is that practice occur soon after the training.

Logistics

Once again, it was suggested that trainings be offered in different geographic locations. Another suggestion was that the five-day training be split into two, 2½-day sessions.

Other Advice

Other comments included, "It's a lot of information; pay attention and [it] may seem overwhelming at first, but it's not too hard once it's done." Also, "recruiting the appropriate people for the training is the key to its success; some people do not have enough experience with people with disabilities and therefore may hinder the training."

Section Three

3. What are the suggestions from participants for program improvement?

Participants were asked how the technical assistance program, managed by Margot Dana, could serve them better. Regarding the program there were two general themes in the responses: shadowing and communication. Other specific suggestions were also made.

Shadowing

As stated above, several respondents requested more time with Margot, particularly one-on-one practicing with Margot or shadowing her in order to observe and to apply the process.

Communication

Some respondents mentioned the benefits of the e-mails that Margot sends out and asked that the e-mails continue. Other suggestions for increased communication were using webcasts to reach the rural areas, having more contact with Margot by phone and in-person, and generating a monthly newsletter or a listserv. Some people made recommendations about the actual content of the communication, e.g., letting participants know that technical assistance is available, informing them of important changes, discussing new ideas or “lessons learned.”

Specific Suggestions

As mentioned above, one suggestion is to make sure the training participants are the correct employees to be attending; those who know too little or think they know too much may detract from the training itself. There were also recommendations for more of a team learning approach, perhaps involving more case studies and scenarios. There was also a request for more training on the BPQYs and how they can be used.

Margot Dana

Margot is received very positively by the respondents. Some comments included:

"We need 20 Margots...She's just really, really good."
"...she's doing a great job."
"Margot Dana is awesome."
"Margot is very willing to answer questions..."
"Margot has been pretty available."
"She is great."

The last survey question solicited any other comments respondents had about their experience with the BPAO benefits planning program. Ten respondents (48%) specifically mentioned the value of the training and how it has helped their clients, and a few had no suggestions. Of those who provided other comments, five mentioned the time and resource constraints in providing benefits planning in addition to their other job duties, and relative to the number of people needing assistance. Basically, there are a lot of people who need the help, but respondents stated that time limitations pull them away from providing more help.

Additional comments included the value of using the consumer interview form and making all information and forms used by the benefits specialists available to all benefits planners. Finally, it was suggested that more provider agencies receive the BPAO training so that services can be provided more effectively.

Summary and Recommendations

An important survey finding is that few benefits planners, in a typical week, are producing written benefits analyses. Rather, nearly three-quarters of respondents state that Information and Referral is the only level of service they provide, in a typical week. Although more than three-quarters of respondents indicate they *have* prepared a written benefits analysis at some point in time, providing this level of service to consumers on a regular basis is the exception rather than the norm. Nearly one-quarter of respondents had *never* prepared a written benefits analysis.

Another important finding is that more than half of survey respondents spend only 0-5 hours per week doing benefits planning of any kind, and one-third state that

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they are not able to meet all the benefits planning requests that come into their agency. In a number of cases, this unmet demand is tied to agency issues of staffing, time, and marketing.

Regarding the 5- and 2-day BPAO trainings, 43%^{45%} of respondents said they felt confident and prepared to do this work after these training sessions; 38%^{40%} said they felt “somewhat” confident and prepared. Margot Dana’s monthly and quarterly trainings have been well attended, with 90% of survey participants indicating they have attended these additional trainings. Importantly, nearly 80% of those who have attended these trainings said they felt more prepared to provide benefits planning services afterwards.

However, only 67% of respondents said they would very likely attend the monthly and quarterly trainings in the future. Concerns expressed about these trainings centered on *frequency* (some respondents felt quarterly trainings would be more beneficial than monthly trainings), *geographic location* (the trainings are difficult to get to for some), *content* (several indicated they would attend if the topic was applicable and interesting), *time constraints*, and *cost*.

Survey participants were asked for their advice or ideas for the October 2004 SSA training of benefits planners. Although that training occurred before their input could be received, respondents’ comments can be viewed as a sort of “wish list” for their own training in June 2003. Viewed in this manner, respondents would have liked training materials sent out in advance, more hands-on activities during the actual training, and the opportunity to practice what they had learned immediately following the training.

Respondents were also asked how the technical assistance program, managed by Margot Dana, could be improved. Respondents’ comments were very positive about the job Margot is doing. Two themes for improvement emerged, shadowing and

communication. A number of respondents requested more one-on-one time with Margot, either practicing benefits planning with her or shadowing her to observe how she goes about doing a benefits analysis.

Although respondents appreciate Margot's e-mails and want them to continue, many would like to see increased communication, e.g., more contact with Margot by phone and in-person. Other suggestions included a webcast to reach rural areas, a monthly newsletter, and a listserv.

Based on this summary of survey findings, the following recommendations are made for the Utah Benefits Planning Coalition:

- As appropriate, agency directors who sent staff to the June 2003 training should be re-contacted and given an update on the BPC. Selected results from this survey might be shared with them in an effort to gain their ongoing support for the program. Presently, there is a continuum of support for BPC staff, with some agency directors fully committed (e.g., employing their benefits planners full-time) and others, often constrained by staffing and time issues, being less committed.
- The monthly and quarterly trainings have been well attended and well received. To ensure continued high attendance at these trainings, BPC program staff should review their format and content, taking into account the concerns expressed by survey participants, as well as their suggestions for improvement. An e-mail dialogue with BPC members might be undertaken, with the express purpose of restructuring these trainings to best meet the needs of participants. Selected results from this survey could be shared in this dialogue, and BPC members and program staff, together, could fashion a modified training model.
- The comment by one respondent, "We need 20 Margots," is telling. As good a job as Margot is doing, there apparently is not enough of her to go around. BPC program staff might consider identifying the "best and the brightest" from the June 2003 and October 2004 trainings to serve as Margot's back-up, i.e.,

assistants who could be called upon to help other BPC members with their benefits planning, *especially* written benefits analyses. Perhaps compensation for these assistants could be found.

- Finally, a similar survey of BPC members trained in October 2004 should be undertaken at an appropriate point in time, as well as a follow-up survey of the training cohort featured in this report. The latter survey would be particularly useful to gauge the impact of any changes made in the BPC program henceforth.

Utah Benefits Planning Coalition Telephone Survey Questionnaire

1. How would you describe the benefits planning services you provide in a typical week? In other words, what do you typically do for consumers?
2. How much time do you spend doing benefits planning in a typical week?
3. Have you prepared a written benefits analysis for a consumer?
4. Do you typically verify a consumer's benefits through a BPQI request to Social Security?

If "no":

- 4a. Have you ever requested a BPQY?
5. After your five-day training and two-day follow-up training, how prepared did you feel you were to provide benefits planning services?
6. Have you attended any of the monthly or quarterly trainings arranged by Margot Dana?

If "yes":

- 6a. After these trainings, did you feel more prepared to provide benefits planning services?
- 6b. Do you think these monthly and quarterly trainings should be required for anyone who intends to provide benefits planning services? Why or why not?
- 6c. How likely would you be to attend additional in-depth trainings on various topics in the future, provided through Margot Dana or someone else, like Social Security?
7. Currently, are you able to provide benefits planning services to everyone who is requesting it?

If "no":

- 7a. What would you or your agency need in order to meet all the requests for benefits planning services?
8. Do you have any advice or ideas for what could help those attending the upcoming October training to get the most out of it?

9. How can the technical assistance program, managed by Margot Dana, serve you better?
10. Do you have any other comments you'd like to make about your experience with the BPAO benefits planning program?