

## *New Benefits Specialist Joins the Working Healthy Team*

**I**n December, Sherri Sherman was hired as the new Benefits Specialist for Northwest Kansas working out of the Hays SRS office and filling the vacancy left by Gary Youngman.

Sherri graduated from Fort Hays State University with a degree in education and began her work with SRS as an income maintenance worker in March of 1993 in the Garnett office. She continued working as an EES worker until her new position with Working Healthy began in December.

Sherri is located in the Hays Area SRS Office and can be contacted by phone at 785-628-1066 ext. 268 or by email at HASAS@srskansas.org.

## *CONSUMER VOICES*

*By Jean M. Higbee*

*Ms. Higbee has been enrolled in Working Healthy for the past year. She wanted to share her experiences in the hope that others might be encouraged to consider working.*

After 13 years of treatment for multiple mental illness diagnoses, I am finally able to do some part-time work. Not two years ago just the mention of work would have put me into tears and paralyzed me - especially the fear of losing my benefits. While at one time I was able to work good jobs, with the onset of mental illness, I lost my job, my home, most of my belongings, and the most crushing part, my children. I was already suicidal and losing my kids was a final blow for me. I no longer had my reason to live. It took many years of steady treatment and hard work to get me where I am today.

One thing I did was volunteering. Some jobs I kept only one or two days. I would immediately feel overwhelmed. It was too much for me. So I would quit, take a break, and eventually find another volunteer job. I was able to keep each one a little bit longer, and my last volunteer job lasted for 3 years. Continuing to push myself a little bit harder each time I step out into the world is what's finally putting me in the position of being able to work part-time. I mostly do individual contract work for KU and for the State of Kansas. Since it's not a regular job, it's been a little more challenging in terms of keeping up the paperwork, doing employment plans when I'm not working, and keeping track of my income. It is, however, another step forward for me. I even went through the application process for a full-time job with KU recently - something I hadn't done in 13 years. It came down to me and another person who ultimately got the job. Going through this process has increased my confidence and self-esteem. I didn't think I would ever be able to do this again. I would not have been able to get through it without my support team.

I have discovered I don't have the physical stamina to work full-time right now, but each step I take is putting me

*continued on page 2...*

*...Consumer Voices, continued from page 1*

one step closer to independence. I don't like having to rely on Social Security, SRS, Section 8, or any other agency. Right now, however, it is necessary. It has taken years for me to get to this point, and it may take a few more, but I'm working hard on changing my life - managing the mental illnesses, the fears, the frustrations, and the physical disabilities. Not long ago I made the decision that suicide is no longer an option for me. I have managed to stay out of the hospital for several months even though I have been dealing with the stresses of trying to work, the application process, my illnesses, and excessive family illnesses. (My mother has Alzheimer's, one sister has had 6 strokes, and the other has been battling cancer.)

We each have to get to that point in our thinking that says "I'm here to stay and I want a better life." It's hard, but getting there is what leads us forward. Thank you for being patient and believing in me, Maddie! And thanks to the Working Healthy team for all your work in making the future possible for so many people.

## *Frequently Asked Questions*

Oftentimes consumers and service providers alike have questions regarding Working Healthy, employment and benefits. If you have additional questions you would like answered please contact your local Benefits Specialist or consult the Working Healthy web site for more FAQ's.

**Q: Where do I apply for Working Healthy?**

**A:** You can apply for Working Healthy directly at your local SRS office, on-line at <http://www.srskansas.org> by clicking the "Apply for Services" button, or by contacting your local Benefits Specialist for assistance.

**Q: Will my premium automatically go down this month because I'm no longer working?**

**A:** No, but your premium will be assessed according to your countable income following the month that it is confirmed that you are no longer working. It is important that you contact your worker as soon as there are any changes in your employment status.

*FAQ continued on page 3...*

## **Benefits Specialists' Corner**

This issue features Working Healthy Benefits Specialist Judith Vargas from the Manhattan Area SRS Office. Judi has worked for SRS for over two years, working as an EES worker at the Wichita Area office prior to becoming a Benefits Specialist. Before working for SRS, Judi attended Wichita State University and graduated with a degree in Sociology and Women's Studies. She also brings her experiences working with homeless and domestic violence issues. Outside of work, Judi spends most of her time with family and likes to travel. Judi can be contacted by email at [MJXV@srskansas.org](mailto:MJXV@srskansas.org) or by phone at (785) 776-4011, ext. 227.

"In the past year, it has been a wonderful opportunity for me to see how Working Healthy has helped so many individuals obtain affordable insurance. For some, it meant saving a monthly total of \$400.00 or more on their medical needs. And others, just the ability to purchase prescriptions that they couldn't afford before. Affordable health care is a benefit that not everyone is fortunate enough to obtain. And Working Healthy opens those doors for disabled individuals where health care is a must.

I have also seen the quality of life improve for so many people on Working Healthy. Not only does working give them a great feeling of self improvement, but the money saved on health care allows individuals a greater saving opportunity. In turn, these savings can give them more spending money for their needs and wants.

It has been great working with so many diverse people and organizations across my area, and I have enjoyed helping individuals to understand their benefits so that they can make confident decisions about their future. Working Healthy has been a life-improving program for so many people, and through outreach we hope to reach many more."

**- Judith Vargas, Benefits Specialist**

## Benefits Specialists Continue Outreach Activities

**A**long with presentations at conferences and within communities, Benefits Specialists also engage in other outreach and technical assistance related activities. Since October 2003, Benefits Specialist have conducted 149 presentations and provided technical assistance to more than 2,000 consumers, service providers, caseworkers, and other individuals on either a case-by-case basis or in terms of programmatic issues and questions.

Conferences at which Benefits Specialists will conduct Working Healthy presentations include the following:

- March 30-31, KanTrans: Kansas Transition Conference, Wichita
- April 1, Social Security Administration & Working Healthy Outreach, Topeka Public Library
- April 6-8, Issues Forum (no presentation, but Specialists will be available for discussions and to answer questions), Kansas City Missouri
- May 11-13, ADA Symposium, Kansas City Hyatt Regency at Crown Center

*For additional information regarding conferences please contact the Benefits Specialist Team Leader, Nancy Scott, by phone at 785-291-3461 or by e-mail [NAS@srskansas.org](mailto:NAS@srskansas.org).*

In December, SRS compiled a list of Kansans with disabilities and earnings but were not enrolled in Working Healthy. Benefits Specialists sent letters providing information about Working Healthy and their contact information to these individuals. A total of 27 individuals responded to the letters and several are now new Working Healthy enrollees.

Finally, three of the Benefits Specialists work at offices in their regions on a cyclical basis each week or month (see Table below). Those not listed (Norm White, Kansas City; Judi Vargas, Northeast; Sherri Sherman, Northwest; and Dan Hallacy, Southeast), as well as the other specialists, are available at anytime by appointment. Please call them directly or toll free at **1-800-449-1439**.

Specialist/Region	Location & Date(s)
Carrie Boettcher, Southcentral	Topeka SRS office: every Wednesday Valeo Behavioral Health Care: January 20, February 17, March 16, April 20, May 18 Winfield SRS Office: January 15, February 19, March 18, April 15, May 20
Steve Curtis, Southwest	Garden City Center for Independent Living: February 3, March 2, April 13 Dodge City Center for Independent Living: February 2, March 1, April 5 Liberal Center for Independent Living: February 17, March 16, April 20
Maddie Anthony, Wichita	Newton SRS office: mornings on the 1st & 3rd Tuesday of each month McPherson SRS office: afternoons on the 3rd Tuesday of each month Hutchinson SRS office: all day the 2nd Wednesday of each month

*...FAQ, continued from page 2*

**Q: Is Working Healthy a Social Security Program?**

**A:** No. Working Healthy is a Medicaid program, through Social and Rehabilitation Services, for employed persons who also have a disability based on Social Security criteria.

**Q: Can Working Healthy or the Benefits Specialists help me find a job?**

**A:** No, Working Healthy cannot help individuals with job placement. They can however direct you to programs that assist with finding jobs. For example, the KS JobLink is a good place to start: <http://www.kansasjoblink.com>

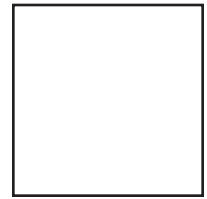
**Q: Why did I get a letter saying I would be converted back to a spenddown?**

**A:** This can happen if an individual did not provide, or did not provide in a timely manner, his or her EES worker with the proper information at the desk-review for continued Working Healthy eligibility. If this happens to you, please contact your EES worker or Benefits Specialist.

*Watch for more FAQ's on-line at <http://das.kucrl.org/medicaid.html> and in the next issue in April!*

## WORKING HEALTHY

University of Kansas  
Medicaid Infrastructure Change Evaluation Project  
CRL, Division of Adult Studies  
Joseph R. Pearson Hall  
1122 West Campus Road, Room 521  
Lawrence, Kansas 66045-3101  
785-864-7085



**Return service requested**

---

**This newsletter and other information regarding Working Healthy can be found on-line at: <http://das.kucrl.org/medicaid.html>**

*Working Healthy is published by the KU-CRL Division of Adult Studies and the Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services.*

*Additional copies and copies in alternate formats are available upon request by writing the University of Kansas, CRL-Division of Adult Studies, Attn: Noelle, JR Pearson Hall, Room 521, 1122 West Campus Rd., Lawrence, KS 66045-3101, by phone (785) 864-7085, or by E-mail: [pixie@ku.edu](mailto:pixie@ku.edu)*

***KU Research Team***

*Jean Hall, Principal Investigator*

*Noelle Kurth, Project Coordinator/Editor*

*Dan Cox, Graduate Research Assistant*



***SRS, Division of Health Care Policy***

*Mary Ellen O'Brien Wright, Program Director*

*Nancy Scott, Benefits Specialist Team Leader*

