

Working Healthy: A Consumer Advocate's Viewpoint

By Tom Ward, Working Healthy Enrollee, Leavenworth

As many of you reading this probably already know, anyone with a chronic illness, mental or physical, receiving SSI or SSDI, generally lives at or below the poverty level. Medications are often expensive, some not even covered under the Medicaid co-pay, and we often choose to do without one or more of our medications so we can put food on the table or pay utilities and rent.

The prospect of trying to return to work, even part-time, is both stressful and frightening. One wonders if they will risk losing their SSI, SSDI, or any medical benefits. Living in poverty is hard enough, and becoming poorer by working is hardly an incentive to even try. What if acute illness strikes, or chronic illness reoccurs? The catastrophic financial liability can cut off access to medical treatment entirely because of debt load. Let's not forget the other potential consequences: divorce, homelessness, substance abuse, criminal behavior, bankruptcy, and even suicide, that cause personal tragedies that may result from failure to maintain one's health and financial stability. All these create more problems for society as well.

There is absolutely no way I could have returned to full-time work, using trial work months (you get only 9 trial work months in your lifetime), and losing my SSDI entirely after they were used up. Twenty years of chronic illness have proven I may last 6 months, or a year or two, before acute symptoms recur working full time, and with an intermittent work history, it's difficult to find a job with medical benefits. I would then have to go through the entire disability determination process again, survive another 3 or 4 years under extreme poverty again, and live through hopelessness again. Thousands of other Kansans are in the same situation.

Working Healthy has given hope to those of us who wish to work again, contribute to the common good, and return to some semblance of normal life. With Working Healthy, I can put my full efforts into my work without those fears hanging over my head. (I'm an activist and advocate in the Mental Health Consumer Recovery Movement, and part-time director of a non-profit organization that serves adults with severe and persistent mental illness.) Now I simply pay my premium, and go on with as productive a life as I can make of it. Only two of my medications are covered, but that is still a big help, and I can see my doctors regularly again. Imagine my relief knowing that if I have to be hospitalized, Medicaid will supplement my Medicare and reduce my personal financial responsibility for medical bills. If you've ever run up thousands or tens of thousands of dollars in uninsured medical bills, with no means to pay them, you know how devastating this can be.

As many of us in the Kansas Recovery Movement know, Kansas is in the forefront across the country in implementing innovative, successful programs to promote fulfilling and productive lives for mental health consumers in all stages of the recovery process. Working Healthy is one more example of the State of Kansas's commitment to thinking big picture and long-term solutions instead of a band-aid approach of short-term fixes.

A Working Healthy Refresher Course

The Working Healthy program recently completed its second year of operation. Working Healthy is a work incentive program that allows Kansans with disabilities to work and get or maintain Medicaid coverage. Benefits of the program include:

- All of the health services and coverage available through Kansas Medicaid;
- The opportunity to earn more without the risk of losing health care coverage;
- Higher asset and income eligibility; and
- Increased personal and financial independence.

Working Healthy is not a job placement service, but program staff can help people identify resources in their communities to assist in the job search process. For more information please call 1-800-449-1439 or visit www.workinghealthy.org



Benefits Specialists' Corner

This issue features Working Healthy Benefits Specialist Norm White from the Lawrence SRS Office in the Kansas City area. Norm can be contacted by phone at (785) 832-3711 or by E-mail at LNBW@srskansas.org.

“Vote as if your life depends on it. Because it does.” -Justin Dart, disability rights advocate

Where does Democracy reside? In the family? At work? At school? At church? In government?

Where is our vote counted on the matters of our lives? According to the Declaration of Independence, all social institutions exist to protect our individual rights to Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. We are endowed with these rights by birth; they are not given by anyone and cannot be taken away by anyone. No one has the “right” to deny our rights; they may have the “power” but not the right.

Yet, our history is filled with struggles of people to gain their independence and freedom. As people with disabilities, we have often been denied our rights on the premise that we are not “real” or “whole” people. Racism, sexism, age-ism, gender-ism, able-ism, etc. all require that people be de-humanized in order to justify the denial of rights. It’s OK because they are not “as human” as those in power.

The denial of voting can remove us from the most basic participation in democracy. Many have devoted much effort to making voting possible. The Big Tent Coalition has registered many. SRS offers voter registration. We have advance voting, absentee voting, accessible voting places, etc. Often my conversations about politics are met with: “I am not political,” “My vote will not make a difference,” etc. Critical civil rights laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and work incentives legislation like the Ticket to Work may never have been passed if all people with disabilities felt this way.

Where does Democracy reside? It lives or dies in our hearts and souls. Our vote is the lifeblood of Democracy. When we keep Democracy alive, it keeps us alive. Let us not deny ourselves the vote.

The Power is with the People! Vote!

-Norm White, Working Healthy Benefits Specialist

Upcoming Working Healthy Outreach Activities

Benefits Specialists will conduct Working Healthy presentations and/or be available to answer questions at the following venues:

- October 14, Homeless Coalition Summit, University of Kansas Memorial Union in Lawrence, 9:00 am - 3:30 pm
- October 20, Pawnee Mental Health (1650 Hays Drive), Manhattan, 7-9 pm
- October 22-23, National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) Conference at the Holiday Inn in Olathe (101 W. 151st St.)
- October 29, Trabajando Juntos, Working Together with the Latino Workforce, Kansas City Kansas Community College Performing Arts Center (7250 State Ave.), 8:00 am - 3:30 pm
- November 11, National Alliance for the Mentally Ill at the Central Kansas Foundation in Salina (1805 South Ohio), 7-9 pm

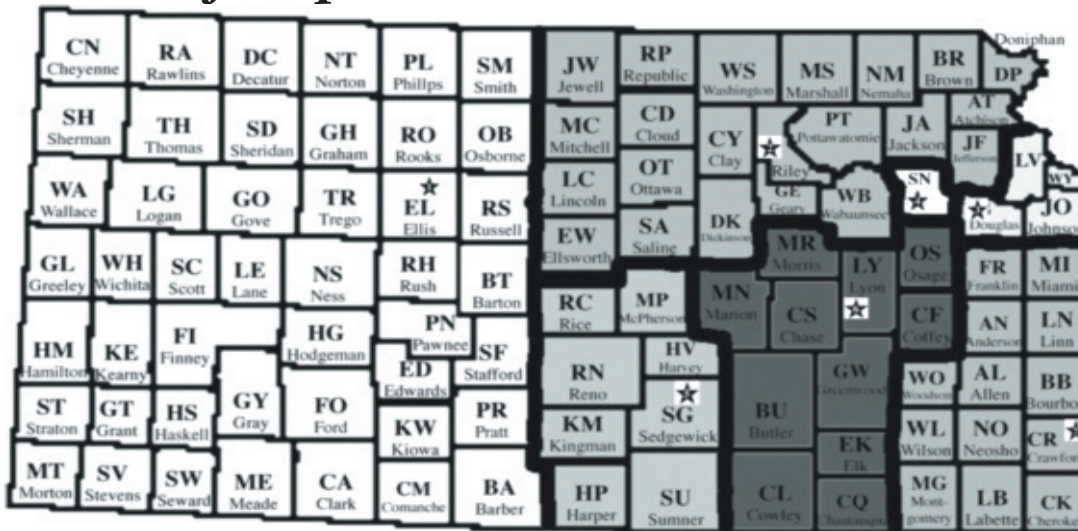
For additional information regarding conferences and how you can attend, please contact the Benefits Specialist Team Leader, Nancy Scott, by phone at 785-291-3461 or by E-mail at NAS@srskansas.org.



Congratulations...

To Working Healthy Benefits Specialist Carrie Boettcher and her family on the arrival of a new addition to their family this month. Carrie will be away on maternity leave until January and Steve Curtis in Topeka will be filling in as needed in the Emporia area. We wish Carrie and her family the best!

Who is the Benefits Specialist in Your Area?

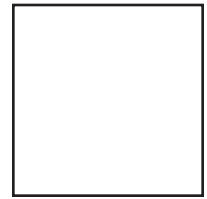


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You can also reach us toll-free at (800) 449-1439

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**This newsletter and other information regarding Working Healthy can be found
on-line at: <http://www.workinghealthy.org>**

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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

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