

# When Everyone Works, Everyone Wins!

## Work Incentive “Tips” Newsletter

# Freedom To Work

December 2008

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## Seasons Greetings!

The Freedom to Work Project Leadership Council, staff and partners are determined to address the barriers that impede employment opportunities for people with disabilities in South Dakota. The Project has been instrumental in the development of new Medicaid programs, coordinating training events, pulling together work groups to assist individuals for career development opportunities and working with the business community to network and share resources. The “Tips” Newsletter has proven to be a valuable tool to share the progress made within the Project and to share important information that pertains to SSA benefits and employment.

In this edition of the “Tips” Newsletter we will share information about the Employer Resource Network (ERN), an initiative of the Freedom to Work Project

that gained national recognition this year. We will provide the Cost of Living Adjustments (COLA) for 2009 and share an inspirational story about the late Eric Tennis. We will also share information on South Dakota Partners in Policymaking, an innovative leadership and advocacy training program. Additional information on Plan for Achieving Self-support (PASS) will be provided in the next edition of the "Tips" Newsletter.

## **Employer Resource Network (ERN) Receives National Recognition**

The Employer Resource Network (ERN), an initiative of the Freedom to Work (FTW) Project, prompted national recognition on November 14th, 2008 at the National Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) convention in Alexandria, Virginia. ERN is a diversity initiative implemented by the FTW Project staff that encourages a partnership between Human Resource (HR) professionals in the business community and vocational rehabilitation providers, to address labor force issues and training needs by sharing information, resources, educational and networking opportunities.

Kathy Hassebrook, Diversity Chair of the Aberdeen Area Human Resources Association (AAHRA) and promoter of the ERN initiative, received the "Pinnacle Award" on behalf of the partnership between the AAHRA, Division of Rehabilitation Services and the FTW Project. The Pinnacle is the most prestigious chapter award offered by the SHRM, which represents more than 250,000 human resource (HR) professionals around the world. Only eight of the more than 750 SHRM chapters nationwide were selected for this annual award. The Pinnacle award recognizes outstanding programs that demonstrate excellence in the HR profession.

## **History of the ERN Initiative**

One of the main areas that many people with disabilities identify as a barrier to an employment opportunity is "employer attitude." This might relate to a lack of understanding of disability issues, fear of the unknown, safety issues, the cost of accommodations or how to find a qualified individual for a job that needs to be filled. It might also relate to our (the vocational rehabilitation provider) message that we have relayed to the business community over the past several decades; the concept of sheltered and contract work in segregated settings. The point is that the disability community, along with the vocational rehabilitation provider, spends an enormous amount of time attempting to educate employers on the benefits of hiring a person with a disability as an option to the labor shortages across the state. The ERN project was initiated to address this issue. It was

designed to create an opportunity to build relationships between the business community and the disability community so information and resources can be shared in a collaborative and non threatening environment.

Freedom to Work Project (FTW) staff looked to HR professionals to start this initiative because of the nature of their work and the stability of the SHRM chapters across the state. The idea was to establish a relationship with the members of this organization by collaborating on training seminars and annual events. At the same time, assist vocational rehabilitation providers (VR counselors, Job Developers and support staff) in their respective communities to come together on a regular basis to network, share resources and work together with the FTW project to plan the educational activities and events. These activities not only benefit each group involved, they also open doors that might ultimately benefit people with diverse backgrounds, including people with disabilities looking for an employment opportunity.

## **Why the ERN Initiative is Effective?**

The ERN initiative works for several reasons, but an essential ingredient to its success is identifying HR professionals who are dedicated to building long-term relationships that enhance the employment opportunities for people with disabilities. In Aberdeen, the FTW Project staff found such an individual in Kathy Hassebrook. Through her enthusiasm and undaunted efforts, she was able to promote this initiative with her peers in the Aberdeen Area Human Resource Association (AAHRA). In addition to the support of the HR professionals, it is equally important to identify leaders in the vocational rehabilitation provider sector. Again, in Aberdeen, FTW Project staff worked closely with Kim Crossan (DRS district supervisor) to be that leader and to team up with the providers in the community, sharing resources, organizing events and collaborating with the members of the SHRM Chapter.

The established relationship among HR professionals and the vocational rehabilitation providers in the Aberdeen area has created opportunities for both the business sector and the disability community. The vocational rehabilitation provider is now a part of the HR business meeting and is allowed time to share disability-related information that includes resources, accommodation ideas, return to work strategies, ADA issues and the chance to introduce job applicants to the group. The HR professionals receive the information in their environment and in a non-threatening manner. In the past year, 18 individuals with disabilities have obtained employment through ERN. It has also opened the lines of communication and enables employers to network with vocational rehabilitation providers in an effort to make job site accommodations, discuss interview techniques and resolve other disability related issues.

Freedom to Work Project staff plan to continue these efforts in the Aberdeen area and expand the ERN initiative to additional communities and HR Chapters. To learn more about the ERN project you can contact the Freedom to Work Project or go to the ERN web site at: <http://www.sd-ccd.org/ftw>

## SSA Announces Cost of Living Adjustments (COLA) for 2009

Based on the increase in the Consumer Price Index (CPI-W) from the third quarter of 2007 through the third quarter of 2008, Social Security and Supplement Security Income (SSI) beneficiaries will receive a 5.8 percent COLA for 2009. Below are a few of the specific adjustments for 2009.

	2008	2009
<b><u>SSI Federal Payment Standard (FBR) per month</u></b>		
Individual	\$637	\$674
Couple	\$956	\$1,011
<b><u>Resource Limits</u></b>		
Individual	\$2,000	\$2,000
Couple	\$3,000	\$3,000
<b><u>Student Earned Income Exclusion</u></b>		
Monthly Limit	\$1,550	\$1,640
Annual Limit	\$6,240	\$6,600
<b><u>Social Security Thresholds</u></b>		
Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA) per month		
Non-Blind	\$940	\$980
Blind	\$1,570	\$1,640
Trial Work Period (TWP)	\$670	\$700
<b><u>1619(b) State Threshold amount (South Dakota)</u></b>	\$31,895yr	\$30,806yr

## In Memory of Eric Tennis

The information for this story was obtained from Terri Sass who worked with Eric Tennis. Terri is a former coordinator through the PLANS program (People Leading Accessible Networks of Supports) and is currently a Resource Coordinator for the South Dakota Division of Developmental Disabilities.

Prior to his involvement in the PLANS program, Eric received supports from the Adjustment Training Center in Watertown. When Terri first met Eric, she was

amazed at how positive and outgoing Eric was; Terri said he was the most positive, independent person she had met in a long time. Eric's disability was obvious by looking at him. But what struck Terri more was not the disability, but the man.....how driven he was to be his own person, to live his life with fierce independence and to live it his way.

Eric was a graduate of Partner's in Policymaking year seven; this was something he was really proud of. Because of Eric's involvement with Partners in Policymaking, he would encourage others to advocate for themselves as well.

Eric started working at County Fair Food in Watertown in 1998 and was literally loved by all who came into the store. He was the greeter and according to Terri, people came to the store just to see him. He loved everyone he came in contact with and was also supported naturally by co-workers while on the job. To become employed at County Fair Food, Eric was assisted by Vocational Rehabilitation Services and the employment services at the Adjustment Training Center in Watertown.

Eric always said being involved in PLANS gave him the ability to hire the folks he wanted to work with him. "I get to be my own boss and I like that", is what he would say according to Terri. If Eric was offered a support which he did not need or want anyone to help him with, he would kindly tell you no thanks and leave it at that. Eric was private about his business and had a strong sense of independence.

One of Eric's greatest accomplishments besides being a great employee was the dream of owning his own home. In 2007, Eric purchased a Governor's House and became a homeowner. He had a dream and pursued that dream with the assistance of others and made it a reality.

Eric was not defined as a person with a disability. He was defined by his work ethic, independent spirit and positive attitude, he used to say "Be good to everyone and live each day to the fullest".

## **South Dakota Partners in Policymaking**

Partners in Policymaking is an innovative leadership and advocacy training opportunity coordinated by South Dakota Advocacy Services. It is designed to involve and empower people with developmental disabilities, parents of children with disabilities and other family members. It requires a serious commitment by each participant during the course of the training, as well as after graduation. The expectation is that each Partner will commit to actively use the skills learned

to encourage positive changes in the areas of community awareness, sensitivity, accessibility, and inclusion for people with disabilities.

### Objectives of the Training Program

- Provide state-of-the-art information on disability issues and services to participants;
- Build competencies so participants may become advocates who effectively influence public officials and other policymakers;
- Develop understanding of policymaking and legislative processes at the local, state and federal levels;
- Foster productive partnerships between policymakers and people needing and using services.

A typical Partners class consists of 20 to 25 participants who are selected through an application/selection process. People with developmental disabilities and parents of children with developmental disabilities are the primary target groups of the Partners in Policymaking program. The selected Partners attend six two-day training sessions from November through April. At each session, experts in the disability and advocacy fields present information and interact with the participants.

People selected for the Partners program will have their lodging and meals paid for while at the training sessions. Participants will be reimbursed for mileage and meals to and from the sessions. Respite care and personal assistance services will also be reimbursed.

South Dakota Partners in Policymaking is in its 17th year and South Dakota Advocacy Services is seeking applications for year 18 which will start in November of 2009. To learn more or to get an application for Partners in Policymaking contact:

Sandy Stocklin-Hook, Partners Coordinator  
SD Advocacy Services  
221 S. Central Ave.  
Pierre, South Dakota 57501  
800-658-4782 or 605-224-8294  
[hooks@sdadvocacy.com](mailto:hooks@sdadvocacy.com)  
<http://www.sdadvocacy.com>

## **Weighing the Risks: Why a Benefits Analysis is**

## Important for SSA Beneficiaries

When most of us take a new job, our financial situation improves. We have more discretionary income, may acquire needed health insurance, begin to plan for the future, and enjoy a better quality of life. Unfortunately, because current state and federal policies can actually penalize workers with disabilities, they don't always see the same financial results from work that most people see. On the contrary, when people with disabilities work, they may be risking the loss of essential Medicaid, cash benefits, food stamps, and more. If their benefits include Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or another benefit that provides additional cash benefits for dependents, the dependents stand to lose their benefits, as well. If they receive a HUD subsidy for their housing, they will likely see a rent increase. If they receive food stamps, they will likely see a decrease, or termination altogether.

Does this mean that people with disabilities shouldn't work? Of course not. But it does mean that a particular job/business needs to be chosen with care and that all benefits, individually and collectively, must be thoroughly understood and evaluated. Benefits Analysis is the process of examining the interaction and impact of any income, resource, or benefit a person with disabilities has on any other income, resource, or benefit the person has, or might apply for, or receive. Each benefit/resource is evaluated on its own merits, and the particular combination of income, resources, and benefits must also be evaluated. Often, there is a precarious balance that must be maintained so that people with disabilities don't risk the loss of more than they stand to gain when working.

Those of us who "help" people with disabilities to find work or start a business have a professional ethical responsibility to assure that each person we assist has access to competent and thorough benefits analysis. It is important that they have complete and accurate information as they make important decisions about their lives.

In South Dakota, we have several benefits specialists that are available to assist you in completing a thorough benefits analysis. In most cases, there is no cost for a benefits analysis and you can set up an appointment to meet with a benefits specialist. This can be done through your vocational rehabilitation counselor or by contacting the Work Incentive Planning and Assistance (WIPA) Program. Contact information for the WIPA is on the back page of the "Tips" Newsletter.

Information for this article was taken from "Rural Factsheet" and was prepared by Nancy Maxson and Marsha Katz, The Rural Institute at the University of Montana.

## Cassie's Hint

### Section 1619(b) and State Threshold Amount

The New Year will bring changes to Social Security cash benefit amounts. As you have seen in other sections of the newsletter, almost all of these cash benefit amounts have increased based on a Cost-of-Living Adjustment. The 1619(b) Medicaid earnings threshold was actually reduced. 1619(b) Medicaid is continued Medicaid coverage for a person even if they are not getting an SSI check based on their earnings. In order to be eligible for 1619(b), the person must continue to meet the SSI eligibility requirements. SSA uses a threshold amount to measure whether a person's earnings are high enough to replace his/her SSI and Medicaid benefits. This threshold is based on the amount of earnings which would cause SSI cash payments to stop in the person's State and average Medicaid expenses in that State. The amount was reduced instead of increasing this year because Medicaid usage in the state went down. Now, if your earnings are above the 2009 threshold amount of \$30,806 and you have very high medical costs due to your impairment, you can talk to a SSA representative about an individualized threshold.

## Upcoming Training Events

### South Dakota Governor's Award Luncheon

Ramkota Inn – Pierre, SD  
Tuesday, March 10, 2009

### State Wide Special Education Conference (CEC)

"Advocating for Independence"  
March 26 to 28, 2009  
Holiday Inn City Center  
Sioux Falls, SD

### Employment and Benefits Workshop

With Mike Walling  
April 13 to 17, 2009  
More information on these workshops will be sent at a later date

## Resources

### **Freedom To Work Project**

221 S. Central  
Pierre, SD 57501  
(605) 945-2207  
toll-free - 1-800-210-0143  
Website: <http://www.sd-ccd.org/ftw>

### **S.D. Work Incentives Planning & Assistance (WIPA) Program**

221 S. Central  
Pierre, SD 57501  
voice/tty - (605) 224-5336  
toll-free - 1-800-224-5336

Dept. 21 811 E. 10th Street  
Sioux Falls, SD 57103  
voice/tty - (605) 367-5330  
toll-free - 1-800-265-9679

### **Division of Rehabilitation Services**

Hillsview Properties Plaza,  
3800 E Hwy 34  
Pierre, SD 57501  
voice/tty - (605) 773-3195  
Website: <http://dhs.sd.gov/drs/>

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### **Social Security Online**

Website: [www.SSA.gov](http://www.SSA.gov)