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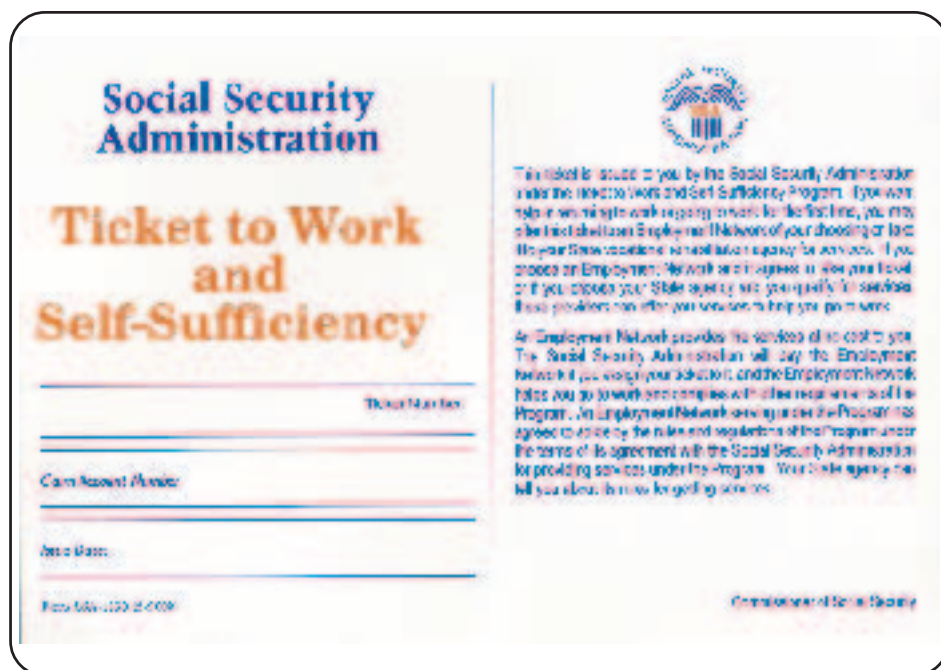
Tickets (to job services) are coming

PORTLAND—Ticket to Work ... you've heard of it. There's been lots of talk about it. "The Ticket," Ticket Program, or TTW, as it is known, is one of those things we think we understand until we're faced with it.

Starting in November, 10 percent of those Mainers who receive Social Security and Supplemental Security Income (SSDI) or Social Security Income (SSI), due to a disability, and who are also between the ages of 18 and 64, will receive a document in the mail (at right). An additional 10 percent will receive their tickets during each subsequent month (except December). Eventually, a total of about 47,000 individuals in Maine will receive tickets.

The ticket verifies the holder's eligibility for employment-related services, free of charge, that are offered by an Employment Network (EN). The services are intended to help an individual find and retain a job — possession of a ticket does not guarantee a job.

"Ticket is an important addition to the work support incentives that have been developed over the last two decades," said



Robert Clark, public affairs specialist for the Social Security Administration (SSA) in Portland. "This is not all or none. It's extremely important to be well informed and ask 'Is Ticket right for me?'"

Individuals choosing to use their tickets are making a choice to become independent of SSA benefits. Carolyn Gray of the Maine CHOICES project at the Muskie School of Public Service at the University of Southern Maine said, "It is important to know how your benefits will be affected and what's the best plan for you. Getting the correct in-

formation from a benefits specialist might show how you can work more and still keep the benefits and services you need."

Using the ticket is optional — it's an entirely voluntary program. However, the ticket does not expire, so don't throw it away.

Only about one percent of the people who receive SSI disability benefits leave the rolls each year to go to work, according to the SSA. Clark explained that if, nationwide, over a 10-year period that one percent increased to two percent, the TTW program

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Personal experience inspires JAWS

By Karen Farber

The best ideas may originate in self-interest. Take Ted Henter, whose company Henter-Joyce developed JAWS, possibly the most popular screen reader product available today.

Blinded in a car accident while in his 20s, Henter took computer science courses at the suggestion of a vocational rehabilitation counselor. He had a degree in mechanical en-



Ted Henter, president of Henter Math.

gineering but it required a lot of drawing, which he could no longer do.

Henter found the screen reader tools available (in the

early 1980s) cumbersome — they spelled rather than read words. Even the early DOS screen readers available five years later, he found frustrating to use.

With the funding assistance from another individual who was blind, Henter started his own company in 1987. The goal was to develop a better DOS screen reader. "It took us

about a year to build a product to have to show and the business steadily grew from there. At the time, there were about five other DOS screen readers.

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would be considered a huge success.

TTW is not the only way a person with a disability can go to work. It is possible to return to work or work for the first time and use other work incentives to maximize both Social Security cash benefits and earnings from work.

“TTW is just one vehicle (to employment). SSA wants to make sure all who are eligible know of its existence; so (by sending a ticket), SSA notifies everyone without regard to ability to use the ticket,” Clark said.

Selecting an EN

With a ticket in hand, one can begin the process of selecting an EN to provide job training, counseling, and vocational planning services. An EN is a state vocational rehabilitation department (VR) or a private company that has been ap-

proved by the SSA. SSA pays the ENs for successfully helping a beneficiary go to work. An EN maximizes its receipts by getting the beneficiary's Social Security cash benefits to zero.

At press time, there were seven ENs plus the VR in Maine. Clark emphasized that as November approaches, the number of ENs is expected to increase.

ENs generally serve only certain sectors of the population with certain services. For example, one might offer skills assessment and job coaching to those with developmental disabilities and musculoskeletal injuries.

Consumers are strongly urged to investigate whether a particular EN is a good match for them.

Note, an EN is not obligated to accept a consumer's ticket — it may decline to serve an individual.

Assigning a ticket

When a consumer selects an EN and uses a ticket, it is called

“assigning.” Consumers may assign a ticket to only one EN at a time. It is possible to switch ENs; however, there is a procedure that must be followed.

Ticket in use

Once the ticket is assigned, the ticket-holder develops a written Individual Work Plan (IWP) with the EN or an Individual Plan for Employment (IPE) with the VR agency. The plan is a consensus between the individual and the EN on the individual's employment goals and the methods used to achieve them. Once the plan is in place, the ticket is considered “in use.”

CDR exemption

While a consumer's ticket is “in use,” there are no Continuing Disability Medical Reviews (CDRs). This will continue as long as the beneficiary demonstrates they are making “timely progress” and/or are working to meet the goals identified in their IWP or IPE. During the

first two years while the ticket is “in use,” all CDRs are suspended. Each subsequent year an individual must maintain a certain work level in order to continue the CDR exemption.

“Ticket is just another piece in the history of work incentive and employment support programs. It may not be perfect, but it is a progressive step forward,” Clark said. ■

Find out about Ticket to Work— it's free

When: Monday, Oct. 27, at the South Portland Sheraton and Tuesday, Oct. 28, at the Bangor Civic Center—both days from 9:30 a.m. until 4:00 p.m.

For information contact Carolyn Gray at 800-800-4876, ext. 8079 (V) or 800-809-4501 (TTY). Also visit www.maineticket.org/ticketconf.htm.

Ticket tales

The Social Security Administration offers a number of success stories as examples of how the Ticket to Work Program (TTW) can work and has worked in other states.

Medicare can continue

Nine years ago, Patrick Bennett was diagnosed with End Stage Renal Disease. After seven years of kidney dialysis and living on Social Security disability benefits, Bennett received a kidney transplant in July of 2001. He was still recuperating when in February of 2002 he received his TTW ticket in the mail.

Upon investigating the program, Bennett found he was able to work while his Medicare coverage would continue. He called DePaul Industries in Portland, Ore. a local employment network (EN), and met with the skills training manager. Bennett decided to assign his ticket to DePaul Industries and an individual work plan was developed and put in place.

In March of 2002, Bennett began to study accounting at DePaul Industries and by the following September was working for them as an accounting intern. After applying for other staff opportunities, he was eventually selected to do a stint as a buyer in DePaul's manufacturing division. Within a short time, Bennett was offered and accepted the job on a permanent basis.

Missing work

Judith Sullivan is a widowed, 53-year-old mother of five children who lives in Panama City, Fla. In 1996, after 28 years as a nurse, she gave up her job due to a severe spinal injury. She began receiving Social Security disability benefits in 1996.

Sullivan missed the pride and satisfaction of working and the socialization of being with her friends and co-workers. Most of all she missed the good salary and benefits her nursing job provided.

Sullivan received her TTW ticket in February; she had been ready to work for some time and was hopeful this would be her opportunity to get the necessary help and support to find a job her back problems would allow her to do.

With questions about the program, she called a local ben-

efits specialist with the Easter Seals Society of North Florida. There she learned in detail how TTW works and what the impact using her ticket would have on her benefits. In April of 2002, Easter Seals referred her to a local EN — the Goodwill Big Bend-Gulf Coast Division in Panama City.

There she met a career development coordinator who helped her prepare her resume and herself for interviews. Sullivan interviewed at Nextel's national call center and the company hired her right away as a customer service representative.

Sullivan began her Nextel training that May and was assigned to the billing unit making about \$10 per hour.

Negotiating access

Michelle Patton was born with a rare bone disorder known as Osteogenesis Imperfecta, whereby bones break very easily, often from little or no apparent cause. After an abusive and difficult youth, Patton left home after completing high school.

Living on Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Patton made two unsuccessful attempts to earn a college degree in graphic design. She struggled surviving on SSI and battling depression.

Fed up with her situation, Patton became very familiar with commonly used computer software and taught herself how to troubleshoot computer glitches. After reading up on how to provide good customer service and how to talk to customers, she started applying for computer support positions in her area. About that time, she received her TTW ticket.

Patton assigned her ticket to the Arizona Bridge for Independent Living (ABIL), a local EN. The director there helped Patton negotiate accessibility issues at home and helped to find and buy a van with a lift to accommodate Patton's wheelchair. Through TTW, Patton was hired on a temporary basis by the University of Phoenix to provide technical support to students taking online classes. Her starting pay was \$10 per hour. In March, the university hired her on a full-time, permanent basis, at \$12 per hour.