

**Supplemental Security Income (SSI)/Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI)  
Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) Initiative:  
Proposal for Focus Groups under Generic OMB No. 0915-0212**

**A. Justification**

**1. Circumstances of Information Collection**

The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) currently has approval under the generic clearance, OMB No. 0915-0212, to conduct customer satisfaction surveys and focus groups. These activities help fulfill the requirements of:

- a. Executive Order 12862, “Setting Customer Service Standards,” which directs Agencies to continually reform their management practices and operations to provide service to the public that matches or exceeds the best service available in the private sector.

Approval is sought under this existing generic clearance to conduct 6 focus groups to discuss a training and technical assistance activity with the individuals participating in the training. The proposed focus group activity described here will provide information on the implementation of a training and technical assistance project developed to improve service to the public. The Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Secretary, is requesting approval under generic clearance, OMB No. 0915-0212, to conduct focus groups with case managers responsible for implementing the project, called the SOAR initiative. SOAR is a federal multi-agency effort designed to improve access to benefits from the Social Security Administration (SSA) for homeless individuals through training and technical assistance (T/TA) to states. Obtaining benefits from the SSA can play a crucial role in access to housing and services needed for a homeless person’s return to a life in the community. These benefits include Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). Launched in 2005, with support from SAMHSA and HRSA, SOAR helps states and communities develop strategies and provide training to case workers who counsel individuals in preparing accurate and complete SSI or SSDI applications.

This assistance helps states develop an infrastructure to support collaboration and communication across agencies involved in the application process. In addition, case managers are given assistance to develop ways to expedite processing of SSI/SSDI applications for homeless individuals and improve the quality of the information submitted with the application. The purpose of the proposed focus group activity is to collect information from the case managers to help assess the implementation of the training and technical assistance. The focus groups will get feedback from the case managers that can be used to identify problems encountered, areas to target for improvement, and the case managers’ perceptions of the overall effectiveness of the project. The focus group project is not designed to be representative or to make any inferences or generalizations.

**2. Purpose and Use of Information**

One goal of the SOAR initiative is to help policymakers improve access to mainstream services for homeless individuals and families. Through T/TA to state and local organizations, SOAR aims to increase the quality of applications that homeless individuals submit for SSI/SSDI benefits, thereby expediting the benefit determination process and increasing the benefit approval rate.

The T/TA is provided by a contractor with expertise in technical assistance, research, and training. States are given assistance through a strategic planning process to help them develop systems to provide SSI/SSDI advocacy to homeless individuals. Two to four staff members from each participating state are in the “Stepping Stones to Recovery” curriculum, which was designed to help case managers and other advocates support homeless individuals through the SSI/SSDI application process. These staff members then train others in their respective states. In addition, ongoing technical assistance is provided to states to improve the implementation of SOAR and gather information on promising practices to disseminate to interested state and local communities.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) awarded a contract to Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., (MPR) to review the implementation of the SOAR initiative. The proposed focus group activity will provide information on the experiences of the individuals who received training under the initiative.

To gather data on how SOAR is implemented at the ground level, we will conduct a focus group with case managers in each site. The focus groups will address questions regarding which of SOAR’s critical components case managers do and do not use in practice (as well as why and how), the challenges they have faced in implementing what they learned in training, factors that have facilitated their implementation of SOAR, and outstanding needs they have in supporting homeless SSI/SSDI applicants. This information will help identify elements of the training and technical assistance that were successful as well as those elements that need improvement.

Focus groups will be held with case managers directly responsible for providing SSI/SSDI application assistance to homeless individuals. Case managers can describe how SOAR is implemented at the ground level, including which critical components of SOAR case managers do and do not use (as well as why and how). They can also explain the challenges in implementing what they learned in training, factors that facilitated their implementation of SOAR, and any outstanding needs in supporting homeless SSI/SSDI applicants.

### **3. Use of Improved Information Technology**

The focus group discussions will not employ information technology but will be conducted in a face-to-face group setting. Focus group facilitators will summarize comments and group discussions by taking notes; focus group discussions are not in the form of an interview or structured question/answer.

### **4. Efforts to Identify Duplication**

The training and technical assistance provided under the SOAR initiative began late in 2004, and there have not been any focus group discussions or customer surveys to date on the implementation of the training. The proposed focus group activity is unique to this project and the information cannot be found elsewhere.

## **5. Involvement of Small Entities**

This activity does not have a significant effect on small entities or small businesses.

## **6. Consequences If Information Collected Less Frequently**

The information obtained from the focus group discussions will be the only material available to learn about experiences of case managers trained under this effort. The feedback from the individuals who have received training is particularly important in identifying areas for improvement.

## **7. Consistency with the Guidelines in 5 CFR 1320.5(d)(2)**

This activity is consistent with 5 CFR 1320.5(d)(2).

## **8. Consultation Outside the Agency**

The proposed focus group discussions were developed as a collaborative effort from a number of agencies, involving representatives from HRSA, SAMHSA, OS/ASPE, and Housing and Urban Development. The training that is the focus of the discussions was reviewed by representatives of a larger working group, and included partners from the Department of Labor, the Social Security Administration, as well as the HHS partners.

## **9. Remuneration of Respondents**

Respondents will not be remunerated.

## **10. Assurance of Confidentiality**

No personally identifiable information will be collected. Case managers will report on their experiences in a professional capacity only, and no individual level information will be collected from focus group participants.

## **11. Questions of a Sensitive Nature**

There are no questions of a sensitive nature, and no personal information on individuals will be collected. Focus group participants will only discuss their experiences and opinions in their capacities as case managers.

## **12. Estimates of Annualized Hour Burden**

## *Respondents*

Focus group respondents will consist of case managers receiving training under the SOAR effort who provide SSI/SSDI application assistance to homeless individuals.

## *Annual burden estimates*

The total respondent burden for the focus group discussions is estimated to be 99 hours. The expectation is that each focus group will have approximately 11 case managers participating. We will conduct one focus group in each of the six sites. Each focus group will last approximately 90 minutes.

Form	Number of Respondents	Responses per Respondent	Total Responses	Burden Hour per Respondent	Total Burden Hours
Focus Groups	66	1	66	1.5	99
Total	66	--	66	--	99

## **Planned frequency of information collection**

This is a one time project.

## **Discussion topics**

A series of discussion topics were developed by the work group participants and the contractor for the focus groups to capture case managers' perceptions about the training and technical assistance related to the application process. The discussion topics identify broad issues for the focus groups and describe the subject matter that interviews may explore with respondents within each topic. These guides are intended to inspire a free-flowing conversation between the interviewer and the focus group participants. They provide prompts to discuss comparable topics while allowing considerable leeway in the flow of the discussions.

Focus groups with case managers will occur during site visits to a subset of 6 of the 25 state and local communities that have implemented SOAR. SOAR was implemented in three rounds. Twenty-three states and 2 localities—Los Angeles County and the District of Columbia—participated in the first two rounds (hereafter, we will refer to all 25 areas as “states”). Ten states are participating in the third round. Because Round 3 states are still in the initial stages of program development (the train-the-trainer session for Round 3 states occurred in January 2008), the states for the evaluation will be selected from among the Round 1 and 2 states.

The focus groups will be conducted with two facilitators. The two-person approach increases the effectiveness of the probing that can be done during the discussions—one person can think about the meaning and implications of the respondents' comments and develop probes that open up new lines of inquiry, while the other can focus on ensuring that all key topics are addressed. Because both staff members will take notes during the discussions, it is also useful for them to compare notes and impressions after the discussions to ensure that all information is captured accurately. All individuals who will collect the data have extensive experience conducting qualitative focus groups similar in size and scope to this effort.

### **13. Estimate of Annualized Cost Burden to Respondents**

There are no annual capital, start up, or maintenance costs to respondents.

### **14. Estimates of Annualized Cost to the Government**

The annualized cost to the government for this activity is approximately \$122,354, which includes the cost for the contract and for monitoring the project.

### **15. Change in Burden**

This is a new activity with a total burden of 99 hours. The current approval under the generic OMB number 0915-0212 is 5,075 hours, of which only 645 hours are in use with currently approved customer satisfaction surveys. The inclusion of 99 hours for the focus groups will bring the total hours in use to 744, which is within the total hours approved for customer surveys and focus groups.

### **16. Time Schedule, Publication and Analysis Plans**

Pending approval by the Office of Management and Budget, focus groups will be conducted in a period of six months. There are no plans for publication of the focus group discussion results. MPR staff members will organize and consolidate their notes from the focus group discussions. Narrative information from the focus group discussions will be summarized to be used for a descriptive assessment. These summaries will be used to develop of a final report describing the overall implementation processes and experiences of the case managers.

### **17. Exception for Display of Expiration Date**

The expiration date will be displayed.

### **18. Certifications**

This information collection fully complies with the guidelines set forth in 5 CFR 1320.9. The certifications are included.