

1.09 SOARing to New Heights: Creative Ways to Boost Application Approvals During Hard Times



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SOAR (SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access & Recovery) has proven to be a successful program to help people experiencing homelessness obtain disability benefits. But recent cuts to the federal workforce – including the shutting down of several Social Security offices, especially in rural areas – are major barriers to accessing these benefits. Learn from providers who use SOAR to assist their clients with SSI/SSDI applications on how they are jumping over these new hurdles.

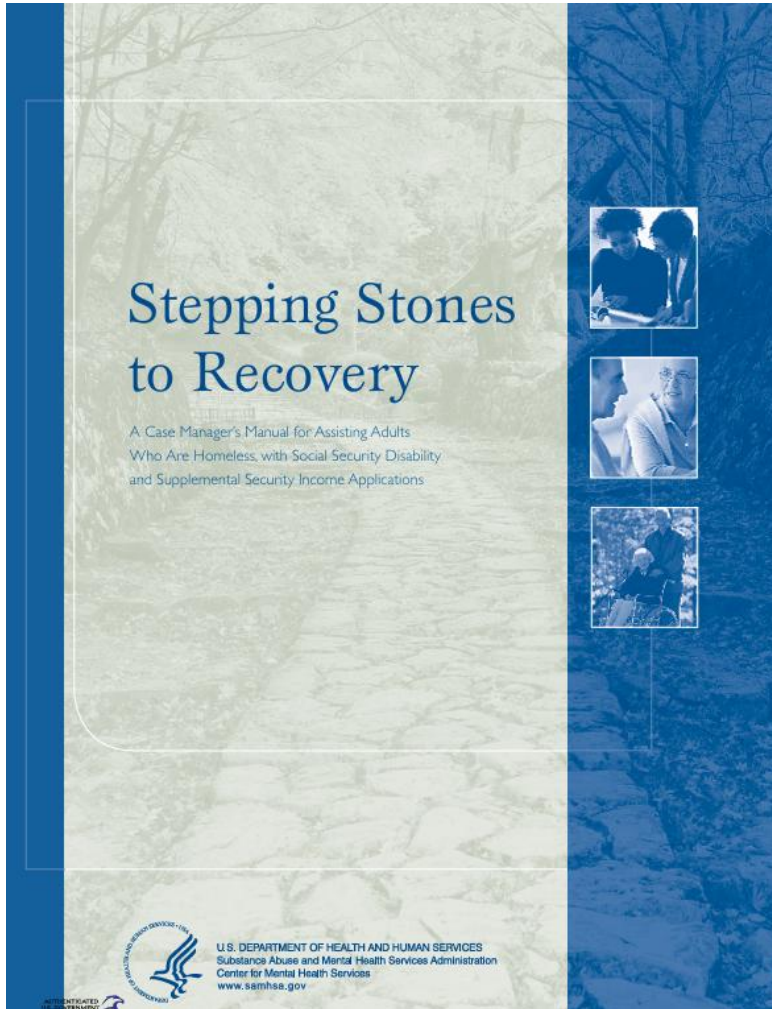


Georgi Fisher

SAMHSA SOAR Virginia State Lead

DBHDS

Pilot Project Turned National Program



- Began in 1993, in Baltimore, MD, as a pilot project to create tools and strategies to assist unhoused individuals with applying for Social Security
- In 2001, with the assistance of SAMHSA, Ms. Perrett developed a training manual and formalized curriculum – “Stepping Stones to Recovery”
- Manual and curriculum were further developed to be offered online – “SOAR Online Course” – exists as it is today



SOAR in Virginia

A State Level Overview

Virginia SOAR



- Managed through DBHDS (Dept Behavioral Health & Developmental Services)
- Funded through PATH and state general funds
- Partnered with 74 organizations across Virginia
- Unique partnerships with SSA and DDS

Local and regional non-profits

- Homeless services, LGBTQ+ organizations, religious organizations, low-cost healthcare, legal aide, harm reduction & local recovery programs

CoC's & Balance of State from across the Commonwealth

Veteran's services, both VA and non-profits

Local and state-funded governmental agencies

- DSS, DMAS, Child Support Enforcement, Redevelopment and Housing Authorities, Department of Behavioral Health, local/regional jails, local community services boards

Local and state-funded hospitals

- Bon Secours, VCU, and Sentara hospitals (private)
- DBHDS state psychiatric hospitals (adults and children)

Managed Care Organizations

- Sentara, Aetna



Sustainable Funding & Lasting Partnerships

**Keys to Sustaining Success During
Difficult Times**



Initially only funded
through PATH and
partnerships with local
non-profits



Short-term/time-limited



Impacted staffing,
sustainability, overall
functioning

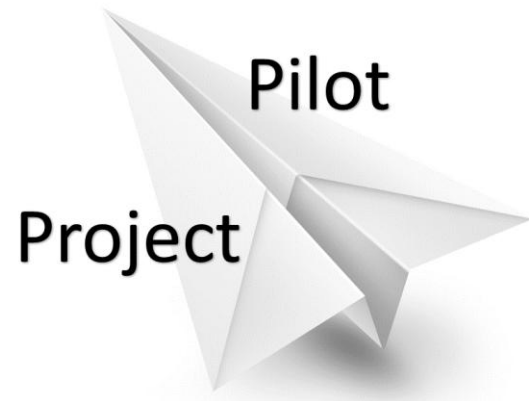
Virginia had a lack of discharge options for individuals leaving state psychiatric facilities

State psychiatric facilities were overburdened and overpopulated; at risk for federal suit;

Local/Regional Jails were large contributors to overpopulation due to arrests of individuals who were experiencing serious mental illness

Facilities were mandated to complete benefit applications for every person who remained hospitalized 30 days or longer, but lacked trained workers to meet the mandate





Start Small

1. Initial request was for State General Funds to cover PSH and SOAR-related positions
 - \$1 million pilot project is now over \$89 million and growing
2. Second request was funding for pre-discharge case managers in local/regional jails targeting individuals living with SMI
 - 3 site program now has over 20 sites across the Commonwealth
3. Third ask was for funding for 10 benefits workers, at least one per state psychiatric hospital

Evolution of Partnership

Requested direct contacts for SOAR with Social Security and Disability Determination (medical decision maker on claims)



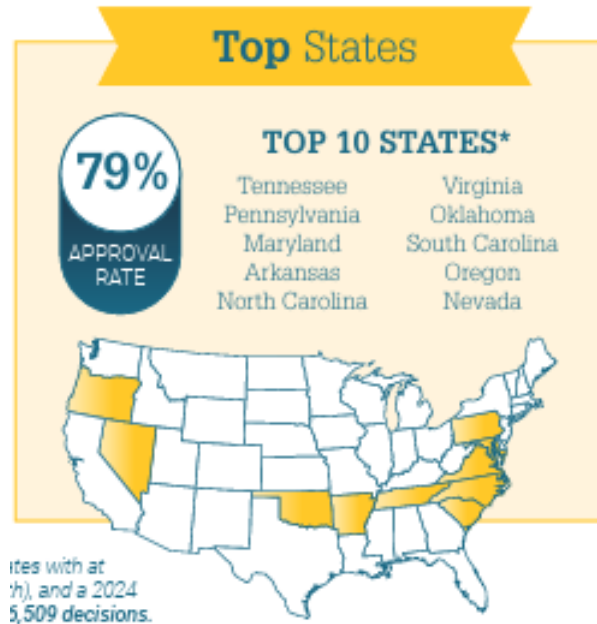
Initially appointed individual contacts for each field office and region.



This evolved into our current model –
SOAR Workers, SOAR Units, & Regional
Representatives

Current Model

1. SOAR Worker at each local SSA Office
 1. Receives the claim
 2. Processes the claim
 3. Transfers the claim to the DDS SOAR Unit
 2. Disability Determination Services
 1. SOAR Unit receives unit and processes to make medical decision
 3. Regional SSA Representative
 1. Oversees functions of SSA SOAR Workers
 2. Receives and completes requests for
 4. SSA Area Director's Office
 1. Bi-monthly meetings
 2. Oversight of the process – immediate response to issues as they arise
- 



2024 Virginia Initial
Approval Rate –
79%

2024 SOAR National
Approval Rate – 64%

National Approval
Rate for non-SOAR
claims – 20%



Ending Homelessness & Promote

SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) helps states and communities support individuals with serious mental illness (SMI) and children with serious emotional disturbances (SEB) to obtain Social Security disability benefits. The pictured individuals are only a few of the many who have been transformed with SOAR assistance.

Resources available:

- Funding & Sustainability
- Program Implementation
- Community Collaboration
- Webinars
- SOAR Online Training

FREE Technical Assistance and Program Support

State-Assigned Technical Experts

soarworks.samhsa.gov

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SOAR in Michigan

Lynn Hendges, MSW

Manager, Housing & Homeless Services

Michigan Department of Health & Human Services



Mission

MDHHS provides services and administers programs to improve the health, safety, and prosperity of the residents of the state of Michigan.

Michigan's SOAR Initiative



MDHHS Housing and Homeless Services Division serves as the Lead Agency for Michigan's SOAR initiative. The MDHHS SOAR Team includes 2 staff dedicated to SOAR program implementation and sustainability across the state.

Michigan has 25 active Certified SOAR Practitioners actively completing SOAR-assisted claims. SOAR has been incorporated into street outreach programs, community mental health centers, and expanding to include Permanent Supportive Housing support services.

We are tasked with:

- Facilitating quarterly training cohorts in conjunction with the On-Line Adult SOAR Course as provided by SAMHSA
- Providing direct SOAR support for local communities
- Assisting with SOAR referral coordination, technical assistance, education, and recruitment
- Providing technical assistance to SOAR trained staff and assist with coordinating with state partners at SSA and DDS.

Michigan Specific Expectations of certified SOAR practitioners



SOAR certification is renewed annually by MDHHS Housing and Homeless Services Division following MDHHS fiscal year of October 1 to September 30

- To maintain Certification status practitioners will either complete at least 3 SOAR-assisted claims; and maintain an initial application approval rate of at least 60% during the fiscal year (October 1-September 30) or Attend a 2-hour SOAR refresher webinar; offered multiple times throughout the year

All trained practitioners are provided with ongoing support and technical assistance either one-on-one or through monthly group meetings called, “SOARing to Success”

- Gives practitioners an opportunity to ask questions, share challenges, receive peer support and advice

Michigan SOAR Initial Claims Performance



CY	'19	'20	'21	'22	'23	'24
Applications	185	131	125	152	151	136
Approvals	139	89	96	109	93	84
Denials	46	42	29	43	58	52
% Approved	75%	68%	77%	72%	62%	62%
Days to Decision	93	104	156	128	139	142

Functional Assessment Statement (FAST) MSR Pilot

- Michigan is the first state to pilot the revised MSR. Kicks off July 1, 2025.
- Developed by the SAMHSA SOAR TA Center doing research, holding focus groups and eliciting feedback from seasoned SOAR providers, Disability Examiners, and Attorneys
- Emphasis on documenting symptoms and functioning, less on “telling the applicant’s story”

Michigan's Partnership with Tribal Communities

MDHHS Housing and Homeless Services working in cooperation with the Tribal Government Services Office has conducted active outreach for SOAR with all 12 federally recognized tribes in the state.

To date, four of them have trained SOAR Practitioners on staff and we are in the process of organizing a special training cohort for tribal health workers.

For more information:

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2025 NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
ENDING HOMELESSNESS
June 30–July 2, 2025 🌅 Washington, D.C. 🌅 #NAEH2025

Kenna Hasler

Director of Homeless Outreach and Wellness Services, Park Center

Maria Potvin

SOAR Manager, Park Center

Park Center provides mental health and substance use support through comprehensive care, housing, and employment services, providing pathways to independence for individuals to reclaim hope, live, and work in the heart of their communities



Park Center's SOAR Program

Local Level Funding
and
Direct Care Innovation



Park Center SOAR Funding Break Down

- City Funding since 2006
 - Park Center's SOAR Program re-applies every 5 years for a grant that is built into Metro Nashville's budget to address & support homelessness
- State Level Funding through SAMHSA
 - This funds Park Center to complete SOAR Applications for Middle TN Mental Health Institute, this regions State Mental Health Hospital
- One Time Funding through American Rescue Plan Dollars
 - From 2023-2026 this injected funding into the Park Center SOAR program to engage more individuals in the SOAR process by allowing us to work with people prior to them meeting originally eligibility

Ending Homelessness is Possible.



Funding Innovation

- Park Center's longest grant comes from a city pilot back in 2005 asking the city to invest in providing SOAR services. After a successful pilot the city has continued funding Park Center by offering a 5 year RFP continuously as part of the city budget to address homelessness
- Hospital Pilots
 - Park Center is currently in an evaluation pilot with Ascension Hospital in Nashville to provide SOAR services to show proof & plan is to move to a pay agreement once the SOAR Model has been proven to this hospital
- MOU's & pay agreements
 - Park Center has pay agreements with other non-profits who are not able to maintain funding of a SOAR position or need supervision These agreements can be

Ending Homelessness is Possible.



Direct Service Team

Team Breakdown prior

- 1 Director
- 1 Manager
- 2 SOAR Coordinators
 - Responsible for all documentation gathering
 - Completing over 85 claims/year
 - Also responsible for vital record gathering
 - Responsible to manage their own waitlist

Team Breakdown Now with Funding from ARP \$

- 1 Director
- 1 Manager
- 4 SOAR Coordinator positions
 - Actively completing claims
- 2 SOAR Engagement Workers
 - Trained in SOAR but do not complete claims
 - Work with people to build their 6 month tx history
 - Work as outreach workers with a SOAR focus
- 1 SOAR Admin
 - Responsible for maintaining service driven waitlist
 - Responsible for ROI and record gathering
 - Trained in outreach to provide vital records

Ending Homelessness is Possible.



Direct Service Innovation

- Resources Created
 - A screening tool utilizing the Blue Book for Outreach Workers
 - Flow Charts & Tracking systems to ensure our data makes it from the field into OAT and out EMR
- Our One Time Funding through American Rescue Plan Dollars Helped us Achieve
 - Typically you need someone to have their 6 months of tx or hospitalization proof that their illness will last longer than 12 months
 - We applied for this RFP to focus more on the engagement & outreach aspect of SOAR so we could engage people to become SOAR eligible.
 - Being able to assist with mental health connections/referrals, driving to appointments, educating on the important of compliance & continuing engagement with mental health providers.
 - We have engaged over 300 individuals in 2 years through this program while not all are SOAR Claim eligible that is 300 individuals who were either connected to treatment or encouraged to continue treatment
 - We also created the ability to have SOAR support in the form of an admin
 - Allows us to operate a service driven waitlist

Ending Homelessness is Possible.





SAVE THE DATE

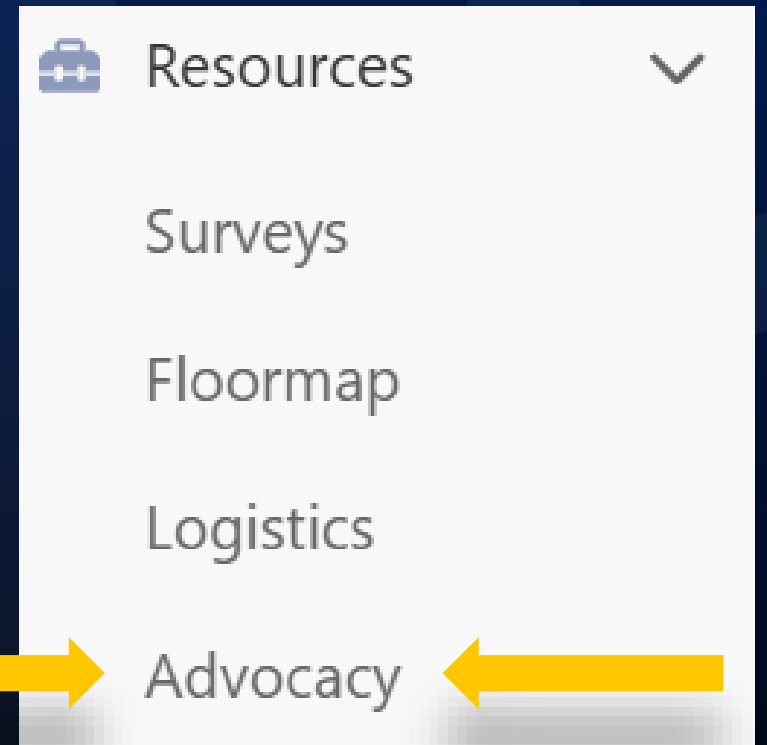
***Virtual* Capitol Hill Day: September 17**



[ENDHOMELESSNESS.ORG](https://endhomelessness.org)

WHOVA > RESOURCES > ADVOCACY

Engage with our advocacy resources on Whova.



TAKE ACTION TODAY

Prepare to take
action and sign
up for our
Advocacy Alerts.



ENDHOMELESSNESS.ORG

TAKE ACTION TO ADVANCE A SOLUTIONS-ORIENTED BUDGET

FY2026 Federal Budget Resource Series

Help the Alliance advocate for increased federal funding — and reject cuts to vital programs — using the resources below.

Alliance Resources

Budget Impact Spreadsheets

Take Action



National Alliance to
END HOMELESSNESS

ENDHOMELESSNESS.ORG