

## **Forum Brings SOAR to the Forefront**

Ending chronic homelessness means tackling the issue from every angle. Even with improved access to housing, employment and support services, there are those whose physical and mental disabilities will inhibit their ability to gain employment and independence. To address this barrier, Journey Home is working to build cross-sector partnerships and increase engagement in one of our newest initiatives.

Known as *SOAR* (SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access and Recovery) this program will be a focus of Journey Home over the next year. It is designed and proven to help people who are disabled and experiencing homelessness access the disability benefits that help them break the cycle of homelessness. Applicants are matched with SOAR trained case managers who help them navigate the complicated system that stands between them and this life-sustaining income. By collecting medical evidence and writing a report that summarizes their medical history, SOAR case managers are able to provide the Social Security Administration with a complete picture of the applicant and their disability. This in-depth process makes disability determination quick and easy for the Social Security Administration, and limits the stress and demands on applicants.

This process delivers a higher acceptance rate in a shorter amount of time. The approval rate for homeless individuals applying for SSI/SSDI without assistance is between 10% and 15% and the average wait time for a decision is longer than a year. In 2014, the average approval rate for applications submitted through the SOAR process was 65%, and decisions were made in an average of 94 days.

Journey Home will be acting as the central point of communication for SOAR caseworkers and referral agencies across the region. To build those lines of communication, we brought together 30 current and potential partners from state agencies, homeless/social service providers and several health care providers for an all-day forum. This brainstorming and action-planning session helped define some very important objectives that Journey Home will be dedicated to meeting over the next year, they include: expanding the number of active SOAR case managers to meet the needs of our population; fostering sustainable relationships with healthcare and medical records providers and educating MDs and PhDs on SOAR and researching and establishing funding for current and future SOAR positions.

“The forum provided us with a really solid foundation,” Said Emmett Ruff, Journey Home’s AmeriCorps VISTA dedicated to the SOAR program, “Not only did we come up with some great actions steps, but we raised awareness for the serious need that SOAR will be meeting and how it can achieve results”

Journey Home looks forward to developing a strategy for how we can meet the objectives established at the forum. Meanwhile, potential SOAR clients continue to be referred to Journey Home from a variety of community partners, a positive sign that points to the synergy we hope will continue to evolve out of the forum.

Over the next year, Journey Home will work to expand the energized network around this model and increase capacity for case managers on the frontlines tackling each individual case. We are

encouraged by the national success rates of SOAR, and look forward to seeing our chronically homeless population benefit from increased access to this stabilizing income which they rightfully deserve