

InFOCUS

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Modernizing the Gateway to Disability Benefits

Public programs that offer support to workers who experience major medical problems have not kept up with changes in technology, medicine, the world of work, and the concept of disability as it is understood today.

- Many such workers exit the labor force and enter Social Security Disability Insurance before it is necessary.
- The system of determining eligibility for benefits has been problematic for decades.

Modernizing the gateway to Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and employment support would address major problems with our country's current disability support system. An integrated employment/eligibility services (EES) system would bring together (1) the timely provision of support to help people continue to work and maintain their household incomes and (2) a new process to determine eligibility. The new process would quickly award SSDI to workers with the most serious impairments and offer employment support to others; SSDI would ultimately be awarded to those who find that available support is not enough to keep them in the workforce.

THE CURRENT GATEWAY TO SSDI AND EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT

Currently, when workers have a condition that threatens their ability to stay in the workforce, they have several options (Figure 1): apply immediately for SSDI, seek assistance (from either the private or public sectors) that would allow them to stay in the labor force,

or pursue both paths simultaneously. There is little or no coordination of these efforts, which often have conflicting objectives. Further, the state Disability Determination Services (DDS) agency, which makes initial eligibility determinations on behalf of the Social Security Administration (SSA), does not consider how services and supports might improve the worker's ability to stay in the labor force.

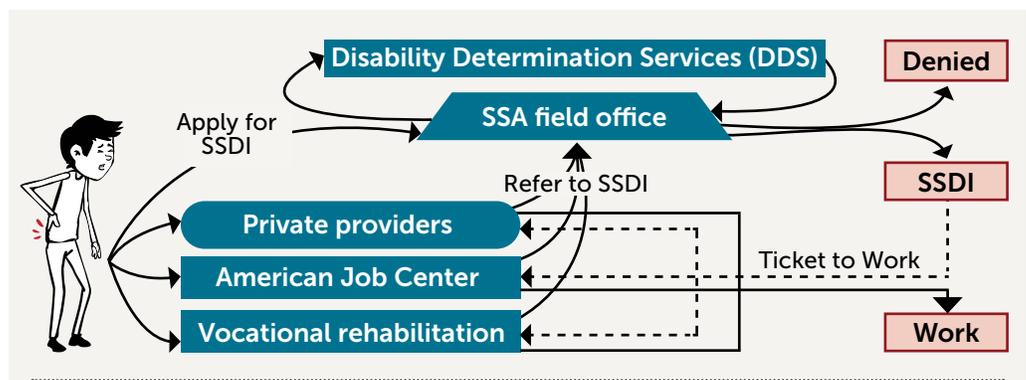


Figure 1. The current gateway

A MODERN GATEWAY: EES

An EES system is an integrated gateway to both employment support and/or SSDI. It's a way to engage people with work-threatening medical conditions while they are still employed—before

they would normally apply for SSDI under the current system. It would assume the current roles of the DDS and SSA's field offices. It would also coordinate and incorporate elements of services that are now funded by health insurance, provided by other state agencies, or available

Reference

Stapleton, David, Yonatan Ben-Shalom, and David Mann. "The Employment/Eligibility Service System: A New Gateway for Employment Supports and Social Security Disability Benefits." 2016. Available at <http://ssdisolutions.org/sites/default/files/stapletonbenshalommann.pdf>. Accessed May 26, 2016.

JUNE 2016

Potential Benefits of an EES Gateway

- It would reduce premature exit from the labor force and entry into SSDI.
- It would reduce net federal expenditures for SSDI beneficiaries by tens of billions per year once it became well-established.
- It would make it more appealing for employers to hire and retain workers who are otherwise at risk of entering SSDI.

in the private sector. The federal government would manage the system and adjudicate appeals by workers. A private insurer in the fields of disability or workers' compensation could potentially qualify as an EES system for covered workers.

The key features of an EES system (Figure 2) include:

- **Outreach.** The EES system would conduct direct outreach to workers and other stakeholders. Workers or their representatives would be encouraged to contact the EES system as soon as they become aware of a medical condition that threatens their ability to work—preferably before the worker loses his or her job.

- **Triage.** An adjudicator would determine whether an applicant needs no support, needs employment support, or should immediately enter SSDI. SSDI awards would be subject to SSA's approval.
- **Help with maintaining or pursuing employment.** An EES system would deliver evidence-based assistance only. A coordinator would work with the client to develop a plan for returning to work, including a timetable and elements related to health care, rehabilitation, accommodations, assistive technologies, transportation assistance, personal assistance, transitional work, employer incentives, and temporary cash assistance.

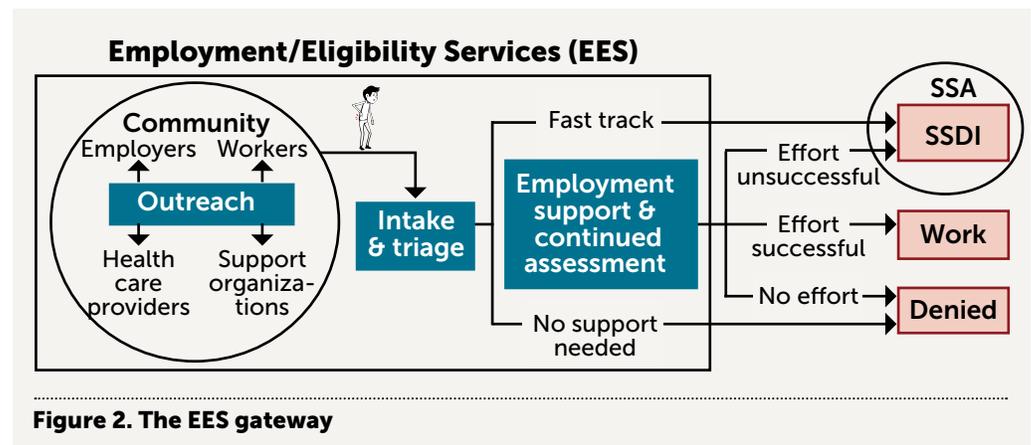


Figure 2. The EES gateway

LEGISLATION

The recently released report of the McCrery-Pomeroy SSDI Solutions Initiative emphasizes the importance of near-term investments in early intervention as the most promising way to strengthen the support system for people with disabilities and save taxpayers' money. An EES system is a promising and practical way to proceed. There is a short window of opportunity before 2022—the year in which the SSDI Trust Fund will likely be exhausted—during which great strides could be made toward developing and testing an EES system. Legislation is required to support that effort, however. Such legislation could:

- Establish a multiagency office to lead EES development, oversee pilots, evaluate and disseminate results, decide which models to scale up, and eventually manage the new system

- Provide states with the flexibility to design and implement systems that efficiently take advantage of state and private-sector capabilities, subject to federal oversight

Full system deployment should proceed only after pilots demonstrate that the new system will improve economic security for workers and meet fiscal objectives. To ensure success, pilots should build on the substantial evidence about early intervention that already exists from private-sector efforts and initiatives in other countries. Concurrent testing of multiple variants, use of rapid-cycle evaluation techniques, and a collaborative learning process will make it easier to abandon ineffective efforts early on and to adopt, improve, and scale up effective programs.

For more information, please read the full paper or contact David Stapleton at communications@mathematica-mpr.com.

Funding for this issue brief was provided by the Employment Policy and Measurement Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, which is funded by the Administration for Community Living's National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), under cooperative agreement with the University of New Hampshire (90RT5037-01-00). The contents do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR and are not endorsed by the federal government (Edgar, 75.620 [b]). The authors are solely responsible for their opinions and any errors or omissions.

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