

Ticket to Work + Volunteer Work = The Right Answer For Robert

Robert Statam is a veteran who spent seven years serving in the U.S. Army. After a surgery mishap in 2000, he sustained a spinal cord injury that left him with limited mobility. No longer able to perform the tasks required in his previous position as a U.S. Postal Carrier, Robert was awarded Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits and focused on regaining mobility through rehabilitation at a Department of Veteran's Affairs (VA) hospital. He had to make significant changes to his lifestyle. Adjusting to life on a fixed income was also humbling and challenging.

"In this mode, I was taken down a level," he says. "... and I knew that when the time came when I'd be able to get in better condition and back into an improved lifestyle, I would do everything I could to get there."

Robert was determined to return to the workforce as soon as he was in a position to try. But he had concerns. *"The main thing I was worried about was whether my health would get in the way," he says. "What if I really wasn't ready and employment didn't work out? SSDI was my only source of income. Getting approved is such a process that I didn't want to tamper with my benefits in any way."*

Connecting with Ticket to Work

The VA put Robert in touch with the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), an employment services provider that also offers benefits counseling. They talked about his employment options and the impact that work would have on his benefits. Robert's counselor told him about Social Security's Ticket to Work program and Work Incentives. The Ticket to Work program is voluntary, and offers free employment support services to Social Security disability beneficiaries ages 18 through 64. Work Incentives are rules that make it easier for adults with disabilities to return to work or to work for the first time. Among other things, Work Incentives allow



most Social Security disability beneficiaries to receive Medicaid or Medicare coverage and some cash benefits even after they get a well-paying job.

“It cleared up some unknowns about work and benefits. I learned there are options which would allow me to prepare for work or make an attempt at work. During that transition period, I would continue to receive benefits. This took away some of the fear and doubt I felt. I knew that if my disability interfered with employment [within five years], I could go back on benefits without a new application.”

Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) is just one of the Ticket program's 1,000+ authorized service providers known as Employment Networks (ENs). ENs and state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies offer Social Security disability beneficiaries a range of services, including rehabilitation, career and benefits counseling, vocational training, job placement, job-coaching and ongoing employment support. Program participants may speak with several providers before finding a good match, and can choose any EN that meets

To find an Employment Network near you, visit www.socialsecurity.gov/work to use our "Find Help" tool. You can also contact the Ticket to Work Help Line at **1-866-968-7842 (V)** or **866-833-2967 (TTY/TDD)**



Volunteer Work: A Stepping Stone

Volunteer work turned out to be a valuable stepping stone. Together, Robert and his career counselor updated his résumé and sent it to the National PVA office. Robert applied for a position as a National Service Officer. In this role, he would advocate for other veterans to make sure they are getting the services and benefits they need. Many veterans qualify for multiple benefits, and Robert would help them navigate the complex rules surrounding them. It is a job for which he is uniquely suited. His knowledge of both disability and veterans' benefits combines with a personable style and resourceful approach that would allow Robert to serve his peers in a fulfilling occupation. PVA saw this, and hired him in 2010. It is somewhat unusual for an EN to hire a client. More often, ENs help clients like Robert in their efforts to find work with another employer. But PVA had a need, and Robert was the right fit for the job.

their needs. Robert chose to work with PVA. Together, they explored his interests and skills. They considered what types of work would incorporate both and developed an Individual Work Plan (IWP) to help him achieve his employment goals.

The plan included continuing education. Robert decided to go back to school to study social work and improve his job prospects. While he made progress in school, Robert's EN helped him find a volunteer program at the Heinz Veteran's hospital in Chicago. He became a peer counselor and enjoyed helping fellow veterans get the services needed for a smoother transition back into civilian life. It took time to learn each service member's story, establish trust and piece together a profile of needs and eligibility. Patience and kindness paid off with Robert's clients. Success in this program renewed his confidence in his ability to contribute and help others. PVA's vocational counseling services helped Robert discover that assisting other veterans was his next calling. The education and training he received laid the groundwork for future success.

“I learned a lot about myself, and it gave me an opportunity to kind of refocus my life. So, the disability (and the help that came with it) played a major role in ... where I am today. It kind of slowed my life down; gave me a chance to refocus and look at things in another way. If it wasn't for my disability, maybe I wouldn't have gone back to school, or [taken] such a strong interest in helping others as I have today.”

“I never imagined I would get a job like the one I've had as a National Service Officer. It's rewarding to advocate for someone else. So many vets don't get the help they need because they don't know where to begin and how to go about the process. Ticket to Work helped me go to work where my heart is.”

Robert says the Ticket program and employment have helped improve both his health and his outlook. Working shifted focus from his condition to helping others. At first, he was “...waiting on that check month to month, trying to find a way to keep occupied...” Today, Robert is learning new skills and building a new future.

“Ticket to Work did its part for me. I would encourage anybody to give it a try. When I took that first step, everything fell into place.”

Ticket to Work and Work Incentives helped Robert find his path to self-sufficiency. Find yours. Visit www.socialsecurity.gov/work or call the **Ticket Help Line at 1-866-968-7842 (V) or 866-833-2967 (TTY/TDD)** to learn more.

[Watch Robert's video](#)

