Research Reports

Effectiveness of the Ticket to Work Program for Beneficiaries Who Are Blind or Have Low Vision: Comparisons with Other Beneficiaries

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The Ticket to Work (TTW) program began in 13 states in February 2002, and nationwide implementation was completed in fall 2004. This federally funded program is meant to assist persons who receive disability benefits from the Social Security Administration (SSA) in obtaining employment, with the ultimate goal of terminating SSA benefits and thereby providing a cost savings for the government (Livermore et al., 2003). Other goals of the program are to increase beneficiaries' choice of providers of rehabilitation services and to improve the quality of rehabilitation services by providing for competition among service providers. With its focus on employment, the TTW program would seem to be an excellent opportunity for beneficiaries who are blind or have low vision, since lower levels of employment are a well-known problem for them compared to persons without disabilities and persons with most other types of disabilities (Houtenville, 2003; Kirchner, Schmeidler, & Todorov, 1999). However, the manner in which the program has been implemented has caused professionals in the field of blindness rehabilitation to voice concerns about whether the program is effective with beneficiaries who are blind or have low vision. This concern stems primarily from the fact that the program has not provided incentives to serve beneficiaries who are more severely disabled (that is, those who may require more time and assistance to become employed).

How the program works

Under the Ticket to Work program, eligible social security beneficiaries with disabilities—those who are receiving either Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI)—are given a ticket that can be used to obtain rehabilitation services from an employment network. *Employment networks* is the term used by the SSA to describe the organizations that provide services to beneficiaries in the TTW program. Employment networks can be nonprofit private, for-profit private, or public organizations, and all state vocational rehabilitation agencies are considered employment networks under the TTW program. The goal of the rehabilitation services that employment networks provide to beneficiaries must be employment. A beneficiary selects the employment network that he or she wants to work with and assigns the ticket to it. After the ticket is assigned, an individual work plan is developed, which specifies what each party will do to help the beneficiary obtain employment. After the beneficiary agrees with the work plan, he or she begins to receive rehabilitation services. If the beneficiary is dissatisfied with the services received, he or she has the option of "unassigning" a ticket and reassigning it to another employment network or vocational rehabilitation agency. Progress toward employment is monitored under the program 24 months after a ticket is assigned and every 12 months thereafter (see Capella-McDonnall, 2005, for a more detailed overview of the program).

Employment networks' choice of providing services

One concern of professionals in the field of visual impairment and blindness about the TTW program is that employment networks have the option of refusing services to beneficiaries for any reason. Therefore, employment networks could choose not to serve persons who are blind or have low vision. (Note that state vocational rehabilitation agencies are required to provide services to

all eligible beneficiaries.) Some reasons why employment networks may choose not to serve beneficiaries who are blind or have low vision are that these beneficiaries may require a higher level of earnings to terminate benefits, may be more likely to need expensive services and assistive technology, may be perceived as difficult to place, and require assistance from persons with specialized training in blindness rehabilitation (Cavenaugh, 1999, 2000; Gallagher, 1988; Spungin, 1997). Survey research on the attitudes of employment networks in the first 13 states toward serving beneficiaries who are blind or have low vision found that employment networks do have these concerns, although such concerns did not prevent some of them from accepting tickets from beneficiaries (Capella-McDonnall, 2005). A bigger issue for many employment networks seemed to be that they did not want to serve persons who could be hard to place in jobs, regardless of the type of disability. If employment networks choose not to accept tickets from beneficiaries who are blind or have low vision or, at least, those whom they perceive to be difficult to place, then these groups may be less likely to use their tickets and less likely to assign them to alternate employment networks, as opposed to vocational rehabilitation agencies.

Reports to date (such as those by Thornton et al., 2004, 2006) have indicated that the program has not been successful, with only a small percentage of beneficiaries (less than 1.5%) assigning their tickets. Although only a small percentage of beneficiaries have assigned their tickets, a relatively large number of beneficiaries are using tickets; therefore, it is important to evaluate the program's effectiveness. To evaluate the effectiveness of the TTW program with beneficiaries who are blind or have low vision, I compared the use of tickets and preliminary outcomes for these beneficiaries and those with other disabilities. Three hypotheses were investigated:

1. Beneficiaries who are blind or have low vision are less likely to assign their tickets than are all other beneficiaries.
2. Beneficiaries who are blind or have low vision are less likely to assign their tickets to an employment network (rather than to a vocational rehabilitation agency) than are all other beneficiaries.
3. Beneficiaries who are blind or have low vision who assign their tickets are less likely than are other beneficiaries to become employed and stop cash benefits.

Method

Data and population

The data that were used for the analyses were SSA administrative data taken from the Ticket Research File, an analytical file that contains longitudinal data on beneficiaries who are eligible for the TTW program (Hildebrand, Loewenberg, & Phelps, 2005). The database contains TTW information, demographic information, and monthly records for these beneficiaries from January 1994 through December 2004. In October 2005, when the data that was used for the analyses was extracted, a total of 10.6 million beneficiaries had received tickets—the group that was used for Hypothesis 1. The group that was used for Hypothesis 2 consisted of all beneficiaries who had assigned their tickets (N = 98,948), and the group that was used for Hypothesis 3 consisted of only those beneficiaries who had assigned their tickets before October 1, 2004 (N = 79,613) and a subgroup of them, only SSI beneficiaries (N = 38,249). Beneficiaries who were blind were identified by being classified as statutorily blind (those who met the definition of legal blindness), and beneficiaries with low vision were identified as having a diagnosis associated with visual impairment (such as retinal detachments and defects, other retinal disorders,

glaucoma, cataract, visual disturbances, blindness or low vision, and strabismus and other disorders of eye movement). Analyses were conducted separately for the groups because these two groups differ in their levels of visual impairment and how SSA rules are applied to them (for example, only those classified as statutorily blind receive special benefits, such as a higher substantial gainful activity [SGA] level for SSDI beneficiaries and higher "blind work expenses" for SSI beneficiaries).

Variables

The independent variable in all the analyses was type of disability (blindness, low vision, or another disability). Four dependent variables were investigated: assignment of the ticket (yes or no), to which agency the ticket was assigned (an employment network or a vocational rehabilitation agency), employment at the SGA level, and stopped benefits owing to work. The first two variables were in the database, and the second two variables were created from several other variables in the database. Employment at the SGA level (the standard SGA level, rather than the "blind" SGA level) was calculated from a monthly earnings variable, which is available only for beneficiaries who receive SSI. Mathematica Policy Research, the organization that SSA contracted to evaluate the TTW program, developed an algorithm to identify beneficiaries who stopped benefits owing to earnings in a given month. This algorithm was used to create the second outcome variable. Since the status of beneficiaries on these two outcome variables can change, the variables were calculated monthly. For the purpose of these analyses, information from the last month for which data were available (December 2004) was used.

Data analysis

Percentages of each group were compared for each dependent variable, and relative risks were calculated for the comparisons between the group who was blind and the group with low vision and the other disability group. The entire populations of interest were included in these analyses; therefore, tests of statistical significance were not necessary and were not conducted. Any differences that were found between the groups can be assumed to truly exist, during the time frame of the study. Relative risks are a measure of effect size, which can help the reader evaluate the importance of the differences that were found. They are calculated by taking the ratio of the percentage of an outcome for one group compared to the percentage of the same outcome for the other group. The relative risk can be interpreted as the relative likelihood that an event will occur between two groups. Relative risk values of less than 1 indicate that the event is less likely to occur for a group, and values of greater than 1 indicate that an event is more likely to occur for a group.

RESULTS

Hypotheses 1 and 2

Contrary to Hypothesis 1, beneficiaries who were blind or had low vision were more likely than were beneficiaries with other disabilities to assign their tickets. This difference was especially substantial for beneficiaries who were statutorily blind, who were almost twice as likely to assign a ticket as were those with other disabilities. In line with Hypothesis 2, beneficiaries who were blind or had low vision were substantially less likely to assign their tickets to employment networks. Differences were slightly larger for the beneficiaries who were blind than for those with low vision, who were almost half as likely to assign their tickets to employment networks than were beneficiaries with other disabilities (see Table 1 for the complete results).

Hypothesis 3

In line with Hypothesis 3, SSI beneficiaries with low vision who assigned their tickets were the least likely to be employed at the SGA level of the three groups, while SSI beneficiaries who were blind who assigned

Table 1
Percentages and relative risks associated with the dependent variables.

Variable	Statutory blind	*N*	Low vision	*N*	Other disability	*N*
Assignment of ticket	1.80 (1.98)	197,777	1.29 (1.42)	122,048	0.91	10,293,947
Assignment to employment network	5.69 (0.54)	3,568	6.15 (0.59)	1,576	10.51	93,804
Employment at SGA[a]	7.76 (1.20)	1,302	5.23 (0.81)	440	6.46	36,507
Stopped cash benefits	1.57 (0.63)	2,875	1.85 (0.74)	1,300	2.50	75,438

Note: Relative risks are in parentheses, with "other disability" serving as the comparison group.
[a] SSI beneficiaries only; SGA = substantial gainful activity.

their tickets were the most likely to be employed at the SGA level. Both beneficiaries who were blind and those with low vision were less likely to stop cash benefits because of earnings from employment than were beneficiaries with other disabilities. Beneficiaries with other disabilities were more than 1.5 times more likely to stop cash benefits than were beneficiaries who were blind and were 1.35 times more likely to stop cash benefits than were beneficiaries with low vision. (Note that these values were obtained by taking the inverse of the relative risk values that are presented in Table 1. Generally, interpretation is easier when the value being discussed is greater than 1 than when it is less than 1.)

Discussion

Percentage differences between the groups tended to be small. However, because percentages for each dependent variable were small, these small differences were meaningful, as illustrated by the relative risk values. Two of the three hypotheses were supported or partially supported by the data analyses. As expected, beneficiaries who were blind or had low vision were substantially less likely than were beneficiaries with other disabilities to assign their tickets to employment networks (Hypothesis 1) and were less likely to be employed at an earnings level that was high enough to stop cash benefits (Hypothesis 3). An unexpected finding was that beneficiaries who were blind or had low vision were more likely to assign their tickets, with beneficiaries who are blind approximately twice as likely as other beneficiaries to assign tickets. This finding may be indicative of the difficulties that persons who are blind or have low vision face in obtaining employment. It could signify that a larger percentage of individuals in these groups would like to work but believe that they cannot obtain employment on their own. It may also signify a real or perceived threat of discrimination by employers. In a survey of SSA beneficiaries, TTW program participants were much more likely than were beneficiaries who did not use their tickets to report that their reasons for not working included discouragement by previous attempts to work, the inability to find jobs they were qualified for, the inability to find jobs that they wanted, and employers who were not willing to give them a chance (Thornton et al., 2006). The fact that a higher percentage of beneficiaries who were blind or had low vision assigned their tickets may indicate that these beneficiaries are more likely to experience these employment difficulties.

In terms of employment, SSI beneficiaries with low vision were slightly less likely to be employed at the SGA level than were those with other disabilities, while SSI beneficiaries who were statutorily blind were more likely to be employed at the SGA level than were the other groups. However, those who were statutorily blind were also more likely to be employed at the SGA level prior to the implementation of the

TTW program, indicating that, in general, this group may be more likely to work than the other groups, regardless of the TTW program. In terms of being employed with earnings at a level that stops cash benefits, both beneficiaries who were blind and those with low vision were less likely to reach this goal than were those with other disabilities. This last finding must be considered along with the fact that some beneficiaries who are statutorily blind need to earn a higher salary to stop receiving cash benefits. For SSDI beneficiaries, this difference is caused by the different SGA levels that are used for blind and other beneficiaries ($860 versus $1,450 in 2006). For SSI beneficiaries, small differences will exist if the beneficiary uses blindness-related work expenses, rather than impairment-related work expenses, which are both exemptions to earnings from work. These differences do not, however, apply to beneficiaries with low vision, who were also less likely to have stopped cash benefits owing to earnings.

The limitations of the analysis should be mentioned. The primary limitation is the short time span for which the data are available, considering that some beneficiaries (in Phase 3 states) did not receive their tickets until September 2004. Therefore, the employment-outcome results should be considered preliminary. The lack of data on earnings or employment for SSDI beneficiaries is another limitation. If these data were available, the results for the analysis of employment at the SGA level might have been different.

Conclusion

That beneficiaries who are blind or have low vision have been more likely than have those with other disabilities to assign their tickets under the TTW program may be indicative of greater difficulties that these persons face in navigating the labor market and obtaining employment. Even though persons in these groups are more likely to use their tickets, they are less likely to assign their tickets to employment networks, which indicates that the program has not been as effective in providing a choice of service providers for beneficiaries who are blind or have low vision. The finding that those with other disabilities were 1.35 to 1.5 times more likely to stop cash benefits because of earnings indicates that the program has also not been as effective for beneficiaries who are blind or have low vision in obtaining employment with a high level of earnings as compared to beneficiaries with other disabilities. Although not definitive, these results provide some support for the concerns expressed by professionals in the blindness field that the TTW program has not been as effective with beneficiaries who are blind or have low vision compared to beneficiaries with other disabilities.

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MySchoolDayOnline: Applying Universal Design Principles to the Development of a Fully Accessible Online Scheduling Tool for Students with Visual Impairments

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Technology provides access to information and resources for people who are visually impaired (that is, those who are blind or have low vision), but only if the technology is affordable, accessible, and usable. People with visual impairments often do not use accessible technology because it is too expensive (Microsoft Corporation, 2004), is difficult to use, or is not flexible enough to meet their needs (Jackson-Sanborn, Odess-Harnish, & Warren, 2002). Traditionally, developers created specialized software for small populations with unique needs, which resulted in expensive products, but more recently, developers have attempted to use the principles of universal design to develop software that is accessible to all potential users (Burgstahler, 2002). A review of the literature showed that there are no inclusive and detailed criteria for universal software design, although partial lists are available from some sources. This article presents the universal design features that were identified during the alpha development of a scheduler software program for use in schools and provides preliminary research on the usability of these features. Although the initial testing presented in this report was conducted exclusively with students with visual impairments, future testing will include people with a range of disabilities, such as

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