Effective Practices: Partnership Plus in Wisconsin

3 – 4:30 p.m. EST

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Nate Arnold (Social Security): Good afternoon, everybody, thank you for joining us. Happy summer. Certainly getting off to a warm start here on the East Coast. We have a very exciting agenda this afternoon. You're going to hear from one of our best practices, the Partnership Plus operation in Wisconsin. I’m sure that's why the vast majority of you have dialed in as opposed to listening to me. But we do have to make one slight schedule adjustment. The last item on there, the update of the new EN Portal, I'd like to have Katie Striebinger of our staff go over it first because I think Katy has to leave and I don't think she'll be here at the later part of our presentation so Katy if you are ready you can go ahead.

Katie Striebinger: Thank you Nate, my name is Katie Striebinger and I wanted to give you some information on the new Portal coming out in January.
I want to remind you that the current Portal does not connect to any SSA system but relies on transfers from you to MAXIMUS for processing and nightly those files are processed between MAXIMUS and the SSA system. The new Portal coming out will connect to the same SSA system we use to process contracts, ticket assignments and payments, allowing you to process Portal transactions in real time. So anything you do when you go in the Portal will be instantaneous. If you go to check on a ticket assignability, if you get back that it's assignable and you are able to assign the ticket that day, that day the ticket will be assigned. You are not going to have to wait for something to come back in a couple days to tell you it's been processed.
I want to give you an overview of a couple of functions you will be able to do. The first is your VR file management. You will be able to view all the information we have about your business in a PDF on the web site. If you are not sure about any information, you can click on a link and see what we have so if anything doesn't match you can give us a call and get it changed right away. You will also be able to get a list of all the users that have access to the portal, so any time you can make sure the appropriate users have access.

For ticket assignment you will be able to upload files for ticket assignability, you will be able to upload ticket assignments and case closures and case closures and you will be able to download a marketing file that is currently a CD that will be a click of a button and here are all the beneficiaries are interested in looking at.

Also you will be able to do Ticket Holder management, a list of formerly assigned tickets or cases that are currently closed. Based on these tickets you can look at all the ticket payments, right now that will be ticket payments until we roll VR payments in. You will also be able to assist with TPRs.

Based on EN payments, like I said that is currently at this moment until we roll VR functionality in. You will be able to list all pending payments, payments and denials and you will be able to request a payment and fax earnings evidence to us.

There are two security requirements that are going to be in place with the new Portal. First, you are going to have to register for a my SSA account. That's the way you are going to see the authentication that we use. You will also need a secure browser. You will receive a blast from MAXIMUS asking you what your current browser is so we need you to look into that because your browser has to meet federal standards in order to work with the portal. Again, we will have a test page so we can make sure it works before we go to the release.

A couple of versions, for example, that work that meet federal standards are Fire Fox, Chrome, Internet Explorer. That is just a little bit of information about what's coming for you. This is just a head up; we will have more detailed information as we go along so we'll give it back to Nate.

Nate Arnold: Thank you Katie, obviously Portal is going to be a very valuable tool for everybody it use. You're going to be hearing a lot more about it going forward. I don't believe we are planning to have a separate question and answer on that portal presentation, but I would say hold your questions and if it's something at the end of this that you think we can answer at this point and there's time, we will address them at that point.
At this point we would like to get to the core part of the presentation, the Wisconsin Partnership Plus operation, so I’m going to turn it over to Gina Haupt, the Ticket and VR everything person in Wisconsin for us. Gina, it's all yours.

Gina Haupt: As Nate said, my name is Gina Haupt and I am the Ticket to Work and Social Security specialist in Wisconsin. In Wisconsin I am the one that handles everything Ticket and everything Social Security for our agencies, so I am the one that does everything for our agency around Ticket. So I will be handling all that.

James Wackerbarth (OSM): Gina, let me step in and do some introductory remarks. Just wanted to provide the objectives for the presentation today. I'll introduce the speakers after Gina has finished with her remarks. I'll introduce the EN speakers but really the purpose of today's presentation is just to explain the benefits of Partnership Plus to State Vocational Rehabilitation agencies, describe the characteristics of strong partnership models. Wisconsin has a very proactive Ticket Coordinator in Gina.

I just wanted to give a snapshot of the state of Wisconsin before we move on to talk about each agency. Here's the statistics about the state of Wisconsin as of the beginning of the month.
Currently there are 363,530 eligible Ticket Holders in the state; 8,913 are in use with the State VR agencies, 435 Ticket Holders are assigned to ENs. Twelve of those or 75 percent are VR vendors, currently there's 94 handoffs, tickets that were previously in use with VR history currently assigned to employment networks. Just want to give you a snapshot of the state on a map, you can see en activity. Wisconsin largely has areas that are very rural but there's a lot of activity around some of the urban areas, especially Milwaukee. You can see that in the Southeastern part of the state.
Now I will turn it back over to Gina, sorry to interrupt you there a second ago.

Michelle Laisure: Gina has been really great to work with, a very proactive Ticket Coordinator. Started out as a VR Conselor in 2007 and has been Ticket Coordinator for the past two years, has been doing a great job. Back to you, Gina.

Gina Haupt: Thank you. As James has said, we currently have eight Partnership Plus agreements within our state, so I'll go on to that. On that slide you can actually see the building where the main central office of VR is based out of in Madison. Unfortunately we're currently not in there because we had a small fire up on the first floor about three weeks ago but we're going to be getting back in there after clean-up.

So the state of Wisconsin opted to be a traditional cost reimbursement only state. We have been a state where we were both EN and a cost reimbursement state, but we discovered our people found that too confusing and as a counselor at the time we were doing that, I have to agree. We really did not know how to determine should this client be an employment network state or should they be -- should they be under the employment, you know, the EN or should they be cost reimburse. How do you do that? We didn't know how to do the paperwork, when to get it in. So it was very difficult for the counselors, they weren't getting the paperwork in on time, so several years ago we decided we were just going to go all cost reimbursement and we were going to keep it that way and that has been working very well for us. Since that time we have worked out and we are doing very well with cost reimbursement.
We have eight Partnership Plus agreements with the ENs that we have within our state. In order to have a Partnership Plus agreement with us, we do require that they are vendors with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, meaning that they do work for us or they have an agreement or contract to work with us even with our consumers for a fee when they are, like, so they might do job development or placement with our consumers and then plus they are an en so that we know that we are getting not only quality Employment Networks but they also know our agency and we know them.
What we are looking for is we look for vendors, what they can offer to our consumers. So what are the services that they can offer to our consumers after DVR closes out the consumer? What specialties can they offer? For example, ERI, who is going to be talking later on, one of their specializations is they help people with older payments and to avoid overpayments when they get out of older payments. Another is Workforce is going to be southwest Wisconsin Workforce Development Board and one thing that they can really offer is not only help with understanding their benefits but they can be hands on because they only work with the county veterans in their area so they can work face to face with the consumers in their area, which some people really enjoy. So what can they offer to them?
So then we have a process in place also that we have with the ticket to work so when a file is closed we send out a letter that is included in case, case closure, so we have all the different employment networks in there. Then also in addition to that I am going through and I am, about a week after closure I am going through and I am screening the cases that are good candidates for Partnership Plus, then I am reaching out to those individuals and I’m contacting them to let them know of the different Partnership Plus agencies in their area and then making additional contact to talk to them about what those agencies in their areas can offer to them about Partnership Plus and how using Partnership Plus or using en after file closure can help them. So we're making additional contact after file closure because, quite honestly, a lot of people don't read the closure letter that we send them and I know them.
Another thing I’m going to talk on briefly because we just started it, we just started expedited ticket. We are starting it in Au Claire where I am. I hope to expand it by the end of fall to the entire state, but what will happen is the en's will have that file in their hands before the case is closed and they will have an appointment with the consumer before the case is closed, so we're really excited about that because we're hoping hand off and everything from then will happen before file closure.
The other thing that we have is all our participating ENs except for one must have, they have people that are trained in benefit analysis. So they also benefit really well. The one that does not have a benefits, somebody trained with benefit analysis on hand is getting trained and they are also currently using WIPA so they are aware of the resources and they are partnering with the WIPAs and they are from the process of becoming trained because we feel that understanding benefits is very important to our consumers and we really push that because you can't go back to work and you can't work off of your benefits without understanding how does my benefits, how does working affect my benefits?
As a matter of fact it's so important that recently here in the state of Wisconsin, we made it a requirement that all of our consumers that are on SSI or SSDI be offered -- they don't have to take it but they have to be offered the chance to get a benefit analysis when we come to our agency. So we've made that and as part of that I’m part of our case management design team so I've made it a requirement when they write the initial plan for assignment a pop-up comes on to the screen reminding the councilors that they have to offer this to the consumer. I’m sure that I have had my name used in uncomplimentary ways multiple times throughout the state.
We also do not refer to WIPAs and we did that for several reasons when the WIPAs came back. The reason why we decided not to use the WIPAs and decided to refer out for the paid for service is because when we were flooding the WIPAa system and what that was doing was it was causing our consumers to wait sometimes up to a year to get a benefit analysis when we wanted one. The benefit analyses coming back were not what we considered comparable to our paid services. Also we were getting referrals to VR just for people to get a benefit analysis instead of them going over to WIPA. They didn't really want to work, they were coming to us to get the benefit analysis so we were getting inappropriate referrals. Also, we found the quality was a lot poorer.
So we decided, we worked with the WIPAs that we would not send to them and they would have their system and we would have our system and that worked out very well after a closure from a VR they are welcome to go over to a WIPA and work with the WIPA if they choose to, and so far that has been working well enough.
On the cost of 503, this is handled by Brian Solomon in our agency but we have business consultants in our agency. Business service consultants are the main point of contact with that, but what they've been doing is they have been going out and doing different things to make sure that the businesses know that there's a main point of contact, they have been going out and preparing for this. They have been doing financial incentives with on the job trainings, going out and letting businesses know about on the job training, trial work, internships. They've been getting information about there about the 503 and they've also been doing informational analysis for the Americans with disability act and making sure people know they are there. They also have been doing 503 trainings with social security and different agencies out there.
They are being prepared to help businesses understand and learn how to tap into a larger talent pool and the job seekers so how to approach the employers and basically (inaudible) people. In addition with that they are being taught how to access qualified job seekers through the talent acquisition portal, or tap, and both of those can help with tracking outreach. Again, Brian Solomon with DVR is overseeing this for Wisconsin and he is the contact. I believe he is on the national employment team.
So he has been helping with strategies for accessing solutions and then he has also been working with the BSTs to help them learn how to approach employers to let employers know that they can help them with coming up with assistive technology strategies, how to approach employers if employers need work assessment and job site recommendations, then also help with diversity planning, employers can come to DVR and express a desire to match the DVR goals. Our case management system, what we can do is along with the o net codes, our VFTs can pull a list of potential consumers that we have in our system, along with the contact information and then our BSCs, business service consultants, make contact with the consumers and ask them are you interested in employment here? And if so let's get a resume' or let's go to the job fair that they are having. So we can pull right down to a city if we want to using that information and our case management system is set up to do that with the o net codes and we can even expand the o net codes to do a wider search because sometimes our councilors don't put in the specific o net codes and we actually went through training where I actually trained them in one of our statewide trainings so that was certified. James, I will allow you to introduce Employment Research.

James Wackerbarth: Thank you so much Gina, that was a great presentation and that ties into explaining DVR processes to engage Employment Networks and looking specifically for those community work incentive analysis as well as providing employment letters through the closure letters. There's a lot of great processes in place.
One of the ENs, Kate Kingree has been with ERI since before they were an Employment Network that came on in 2008, and Kate has been with ERI since 2009. With that, I will turn it over to Tammy.
Tammy Liddicoat: Thank you James for inviting us to participate today in the introduction. Hello, everyone. Also thank you James, for adding that picture of our building. The person that you see in that picture is not one of us (Kate or I) but that is our stellar Sarah Gellar, she is really instrumental in the running of our en so we're glad she posed for that photo.

Just to introduce ERI, we are based in Madison, Wisconsin. We have been in business 23 years and have 18 staff. Our mission is to advance employment, health care and financial stability for people with disabilities. How we do this and a major focus of our business is to be an expert in public business, work incentives and working with individuals and others to understand the spectrum of benefits and employment issues. Wisconsin has been doing this a long time. Our Wisconsin VR an early participant and has been purchasing work incentives since 1995. Evidence does continue to mount that work incentives counseling and long-term employment with individuals can result in improved employment outcomes, how much a person earns and how long they work. We currently employ 9 work incentive benefits specialists across varying programs, we are involved in ticket, we are involved in WIPA, we are involved in the social security bond demonstration project and are now involved in implementation of the promise grant in Wisconsin. So to kind of sum it up, our thing is social security benefits and employment and our business is to understand and solve problems caused by the overlapping and complicated ticket systems when beneficiaries work.
Gina really outlined how it's working and there's a lot of stuff that was put into, a lot of time and energy putting into planning. When we consider ticket to work in 2008 we considered how could we make the program fit our organization and what we do and what we are good at and how could we develop a new funding source to help sustain the work that we do. And Partnership Plus or partnership with our state VR agencies to serve people who are already working was the foundation for our business plan when we decided to become an EN in 2008. And our model was created around the idea of Partnership Plus before we even knew of that term, we just thought it was a good idea.
To provide employment retention services and help people working doing what we do best, trying to help them by doing what we do best, with his benefits. We don't do job placement, VR does, and we asked ourselves how could we favor people, are you working substantially and help that individual retain employment over the long-term.
At the same time we were developing our strategy and model, our VR agency was looking at ticket to work and find ways to develop Partnership Plus in Wisconsin and reaching out to vendors to consider the ticket to work program. A lot of businesses were skeptical getting into ticket, we were really eager, we thought it would work and dove right in and we also knew it would take a lot of time and effort and collaboration among the systems and agencies. See began to work really closely with our VR agency and at that time Charlene Dwyer was the state … and we worked together to try to design a program and agreement that would meet against (inaudible) and also considering community choice. Thank you, Charlene, for the help you provided during that time.
What was so great is after Charlene left, Wisconsin VR continued trying to implement the agreement. They saw the value and immediately hired Gina to help with Social Security initiatives here and she's been a real champion and demonstrates the continuity has and with her efforts cost reimbursement in Wisconsin has increased significantly through that increased concentration on social security and Ticket to Work efforts. So we're really happy to see that en's are expanding and Partnership Plus is expanding throughout the state and we really want to see this continue to grow and grow.
Talking a little bit about what we focus on with our en model and our service model, we focus on continuity between services. We recognize and applaud the huge investment of time, effort, money, we sources that it takes to support a social security beneficiary to get to a successful closure and a job that they desire. And it is a select few that actually achieve SGA and decide to take the leap off cash benefits.
This is a big deal. We also understand this is where VR agency does not end. If they are prepared to help and you trust them, why not seek off and provide a warm handoff to resources that can assist an individual to continue to work and keep on succeeding? You know, an organization that can help your VR agency discover cost reimbursement that could possibly help to ensure that that beneficiary does not fail and come back to VR again and again. So we focus on through our EN.
We also vote on building service with the VR agency that we can help someone keep moving forward and upward. And we know through the VR experience that with an individual preparing for work, seeking work and landing a job, the VR counselor and vendors work constantly so they can move forward, be successful and closure is a big time and are in the thick of benefits changes and few beneficiaries really understand the complex rules, confusing government systems that don't talk to each other very well. And often times an en has to battle with systems to get things right for that individual.
So we are really committing to instilling confidence in our VR partners and the beneficiary that we understand how to navigate the stuff and it can be helpful. There are many, many reasons why an individual may want to give up on work.
The nature of disability is often episodic. Many people we work with do not go off and stay off of cash benefits. It's often times an on again/off again situation depending on a person's health status. Many are motivated to work earning at high levels for a long period of time, but said need to access benefits because of recurring health issues. When they recover they likely do go back to work.
Kate Kingree: As Tammy said, that's what we like to do, is the benefits… We really offer the beneficiary peace of mind.
The biggest employment problem is older payments. We deal with how they happen, why they happen, when they happen, and we really look for solutions to prevent this from happening in the future. A large number of our consumers have as their primary disability is mental health. When they get these letters that say they owe thousands and thousands of dollars. It often puts me in a tail spin and has a great deal of anxiety with these consumers. So we not only calm their nerves when it comes to these overpayment notices and if we can't prevent them currently we can prevent them in the future and help them really get through the overpayment issues so they can keep moving forward.
Again we also help the individual move forward and advancing in their career by balancing both informal coaching and continuing to explore lifelong exploration and lifelong learning. A part of this we also do is a navigation, not only navigating the social security system but employment, working with the employers in communication and also developing their soft skills.
We also understand the new implementation of 503 as it relates to rights, responsibilities and resources.
Tammy Liddicoat: Connections. We focus on making connections and we know through the VR process that beneficiary has had a connection to you and the VR agency and you are constantly connecting that beneficiary to resources and services. You develop a team to get to that life-changing goal, which is the job. And after closure and hopefully a warm handoff to an EN, the goal is to connect that individual to our team, the team works to facilitate connections to ensure the successful closure does stick and that the individual continues to grow in their job or career and ideally that individual is not going to come back to you to use VR services again unless they want to continue and grow, earn more, and might need some resources that we may not be able to provide, such as a certification or education. In that case we are connecting those individuals back to the VR agency. So we're really about connecting with an individual and connecting them to what they need.
Yeah, we really keep that team approach in mind, not only with our consumers but again with our trusted partners. I tell our consumers that all these systems, all these partners, can't be all things to all people. So we help them not only navigate VR, social security, but other community resources such as money management, housing, food, child care and education -- child care and education because some of the biggest barriers to employment are beyond just the scope of benefits. So we're all about not only connecting within the system but once that person moves outside of the system.
Oh, I’m still on. We're talking about results.
Kate is going to talk about some of the things that we're pretty happy and pleased about with results.
Kate Kingree: So all of this, you know, the continuity, confidence and connection, has really led to some results, a real win-win for everyone. The results have led to 75 percent of ERI and VR partnerships getting cost reimbursement. The VR, the EN (inaudible) we're going on to have long-term employment and engagement advancement. This year alone we're having six graduates which means these individuals have been working with us for 3-plus years and are off cash benefits. So the people actually leaving our program are people being successful. The average wage for these is roughly $16 per hour and as was talked about before, a lot of times they will go back to DVR when they need to advance and it's not starting the ball rolling again, being more successful and self-sufficient.
I just want to talk a little bit about what success means as it relates to consumers. If you choose to the choose work web site you will see one of our partnership consumers, Robbie, and you can see his video there as well as there is a video version of Robbie's story.
Next I want to talk to you about Samantha. She is really excited but nervous about what would happen. Everything was coming at hoer all at once. We worked together to get all of her benefits up to date, we met quarterly to talk about coping strategies and talking to her employer about ADA and disclosure as well as really starting to do workplace communication to improve work flow and personal productivity.
What's up with Samantha, now we are discussing going back to DVR as she will interested in pursuing her career and options.
One of his main concerns when he came to us, he asked for an action plan. He wanted to know step by step what to do next. The employment adventure to him was very confusing and one of his biggest barriers was that he had a great deal of debt. He didn't have a lot of benefit issues right away, but he wanted to know how to deal with this debt. We did do a benefits update. We discussed with him about his health care options because he was concerned if the work did continue if he could continue to accessing good health care. We discussed those issues with him. We got his credit card interest rate from 33 percent to 3 percent, got him on a budget plan and now he uses technology to track his own expenses so he's a lot more self-sufficient.
Currently we are working closely with DVR because not only was that a huge improvement issue but access to reliable transportation. Right now the case is open with post employment with DVR he has been able to continue his employment. The position is only temporary so we are working to update his resume so he can go after more stable employment.

Tammy Liddicoat: Thank you Kate. Just to sum it up, five years into our VR project, our vision is becoming a reality. We really enjoy the partnership and social security and MAXIMUS, I just wanted to put in a plug for MAXIMUS because James and Michelle Laisure have been wonderful to work with and easy to work with and extremely helpful. The only thing I would say is put in a plus, we are nationally and are able to working with any VR agency. Thank you so much for listening to us and turn it back over to James. Thank you.

James Wackerbarth: Thank you so much, Tammy and Kate. Very impressive numbers and we're all glad to see success stories of program graduates, also just to see the partnerships with DVR to really see what the beneficiary are. Those are great stories and thank you so much.

The next speaker is from the Workforce, a service coordinator with Southwest Wisconsin development board for the past five years. With that I'll turn it over to Ryan.

Ryan Schomber: Thank you James, good afternoon, everyone. As James mentioned, I represent one of 11 Workforce areas, Workforce boards in the state of Wisconsin. Our area is Workforce area No. 11 and the Cook County, Rockwell, Grant and Richmond.
Going back to when I started at the Workforce Development Board, my main focus is to be involved in individuals that serve individuals, job seekers, which could be disability, older worker, offenders, et cetera. Right now under that grant a very important component is ticket to work and kind of in connection to ticket to work, benefit counseling. As we all know ticket to work is a key part of the social security benefit program. Some of the services if we go to the next slide, my key services is a what similar to ERI in the general scope is focusing on work incentive benefit counseling, community resource coordination as was talked about by ERI, it is so important that assistance is made available to job seekers to access various services that may help them retain employment. There could be health care issues, housing issues, the list could be open to be somewhat of an advocate often times can be of great help to the job seeker.
Career counseling and job search involved in, this is something I am getting a little less concerned to provide (inaudible) my office is out of a one stop job center and we have numerous programs like DVI, WIA, the work force investment act, so there's buildings not only in the building I work at but also throughout the community. I’m trying to be more of a link to other programs for the seeker and take it to work.
Various job retention and when you know when a person goes back to work or maybe increased wages, as he mentioned, sometimes things don't always run smoothly with their benefits. So maybe a little care benefit if it doesn't get switched over to the proper designation properly and to once again be that advocate, the extra eyes and ears, to help me see the ticket to work, starting that new job or continuing on with their career advancement which is as we all know starting a new job does carry sometimes an abundance of stressors.
No. 5, Partnership Plus agreement is being talked about. What I like about the Partnership Plus and her job she's done in the state of Wisconsin is that it really provides just a constant flow of services for an individual. So not only can we help job seekers after DVR but we can also assist job seekers before DVR and really the purpose of the Partnership Plus agreement is to promote coordination of services between VR and the work force en and as I mentioned it allows the ticket holder to access various employment services before and answer. And I think sometimes if a person has to wait for VR's services and they would like to get their job and employment services, career counseling ball rolling. They had that opportunity to do that under the partnership model. It builds and strengthens employment practices for our customers and assures clients' rights are respected. Once again this is voluntary and it's all about informed choice. There's a number of agencies throughout Wisconsin, as we've talked about, that provide these services so it's making sure that the client knows what choices they have available to them. Files are coordinated and seamless services transitioned for ticket holder. As not only -- it's benefiting everybody. Revenue in today's world where sometimes funding cannot be as much as it used to be, agencies have to be a little bit more self-sufficient. And it's identifying and maximizing revenue streams. So, yes, we are nonprofit but part of our world is almost like a for-profit business nowadays and this model allows that maximized reimbursement received by not only VR but also the work force board.
And just kind of looking at what we've done so far, we are very new to the partnership model with Wisconsin VR currently has sox tickets assigned that have prior history with VR, one half of Partnership Plus participants are working full-time, the other half working part-time, they are all over 20 hours a week so it's not extreme part-time. And the one thing that really stands out is 100 percent ever partnership participants have reached six months, two participants have reached one year. So kind of pig waking off what ERI has for being in it for a much longer time, seeing 3 year benchmarks, we have seen some six-month and one year benchmarks so the job retention aspect of Partnership Plus makes it a huge advantage for the consumer.
James, do you want to go over the summary?

James Wackerbarth: Thank you very much, Ryan. You made a lot of great points and as another en that offers community work incentive benefits analysis, those are definitely, I think that's one of the keys to the Wisconsin model is looking for employment networks to are vendors who can provide this benefit analysis in providing VR to offer them. They are directed to en's that have these CWICs which increases chances of employment for the individual so win-win. It empowers the beneficiary through education and choice, mainly through education as far as choice of benefits. Gina talked about talking with the beneficiary and understanding what their needs are to provide them that confidence to move forward and stay employed for the long time. Division the voc rehab is great in the state, they really take a proactive, they are very proactive in matching beneficiaries with employment benefits and we also applaud their moves in partnering with employers to meet 503 goals.
That's going to wrap up our presentation on Wisconsin. I want to thank social security for having us on the call and the speakers, Tammy and Kate, Gina and Ryan, that was a great presentation, thank you so much and I am going to turn it over to Michelle.

Michelle Laisure: Thank you, James. I wanted to say thank you for facilitating and bringing this presentation to us today. Gina and Tammy and Kate and Ryan, we applaud you for your leadership there in with us which is, your patience in working with awesome as we had to deal with some procedural concerns and questions but we got through them and you have plowed right ahead in implementing the Partnership Plus collaborative work that we would like to see roll out eventually to all the states. Again, thank you for -- how about taking that ticket and making it a real story, especially sharing with us the outcomes you have were able to talk about today with beneficiaries, not only connecting to an EN but they are successful and they are go stories to share with us. Thank you so much for your time and Nate, I’m going to turn it back over to you. We can take questions now.

Nate Arnold: Why don't I do a quick cost reimbursement update and then we can take questions on pretty much anything. We've got almost 30 minutes left.
I will add a quick thanks also to James and all the presenters for that excellent presentation. If you listen to this and any of the other best practices presentations we have had you know it really does take a village to have beneficiaries successful in returning to work and this one clearly is beneficiary focused, as everybody said is truly a win-win-win process.
In terms of cost reimbursement last month, I would like to report we did not have any snowstorms here, we don't have any furloughs, we actually worked a full month and as a result we had a really good month, we paid out over 15 million dollars, reduced our pending workload by almost 500 cases and now we have everything come in the door input and we're working December cases. So if you have cases that you know are pending that came in December or later, don't worry about them yet. If it's older than that and you haven't gotten notice that it has worked, let us know and we'll try and track it down for you.
That's really it as far as an update. With that, operator, we can open the phone lines and take questions on the presentation, cost reimbursement, whatever else they have.

Operator: Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, if you would like to register for a question, please press the 1 followed by the 4 on your telephone. You will hear a 3-tone prompt to acknowledge your request. If your question has been answered and you would like to withdraw your registration, press the 1 followed by the 3.
One moment please for the first question. Our first question comes from the line of Eugenia Cox, please proceed.

Eugenia Cox: Hi, everybody. I am glad we got to hear about Wisconsin's partnerships. It was a good presentation and Gina always does a good job.
My question concerns the new Portal. I’m a little concerned because we haven't really heard anything about the new Portal and I found out it has no connection to the systems we were using before so that concerns me. So, you know, we currently do our in use files through move it and the record so we don't know what the changes and as far as there hasn't been any type of a testing of this new system and I’m hoping that you've heard what we've said in the past, that we need to have some sort of testing before the implementation of any new system just to work out the bugs because there will -- so again we need to know are we going to be able to test.
The other thing that's a huge concern for us is any changes or new systems that are used, we need enough notice to be able to change our systems on a state basis. A lot of us use the tomorrow tracker and we need time to have those systems updated to know how to take in files, how to export files and things like that. So as far as I know we haven't heard anything about this new system.
The SSA individual accounts that we have to now sign up for, that has some concerns to me also. I have one but it also concerns me are you going to be, are you going to be looking at our social security data? That's a big concern to me.
I also heard that there could be a possibility of us going through suitability to be able to access these systems which requires us to do background checks, fingerprint cards, all that kind of stuff. If that's the case we've already been through this as state employees, we have to go true background checks, we have to go to fingerprints, all that, because in our agency we work through the department of justice.
Again, a lot of concerns with this new Portal. Haven't heard anything, as far as I know nobody's tested it at least on our level and if we have gone through a testing I would like to be a part of that. So again a lot of questions, a lot of concerns and there's really not anybody that has answers at this point. I wanted to talk to Katy for answers to these questions and I don't know, Nate, if you have answers to these questions.

Desiree Fitzgerald: Hi, this is Desiree. We are incrementally giving you more and more information about the Portal. If you were on last month's call, and I believe you were, you heard we will have a pilot. In terms of SSA rolling out a new application, we have elaborate testing within our organization but we are also going to be looking at it from the VR perspective. I don't think you have any reason to be concerned at this point. You will be consulted along the way in terms of feedback on how it's going. When we roll it out there will be an overlap in the current portal and there will be post-validation after it's up and running in January. But we are a long ways from January. I think you had one other point concerning the suitability. Suitability, we'll have to get back to you on that. Everyone is supposed to have suitability and whatever the agreements are, I’m sure we will be considering the same things as far as what VR agencies have to do. We're looking at VR agencies as being primary customers because they have most of the clients and we're making it easier for VR agencies but there will be training. If you want to participate in the pilot then there will be information coming out about that.
The one thing that Katie mentioned today that was really important is she talked about the different browsers and the important browser of keeping the application up to date. It will be a web-based application, you will be able to get it from the web site and it will be a necessary application.
Concerning the my SSA page, that is your personal account. Nobody associated with the Ticket to Work program or our operations will have the personal id that you will need to have to get to your information. There will be a web site that links off of that, so two authentications like you have now but you will have to first go true the my SSA page so it can identify you as being the person that you are and will also be authorized to work within a particular organization. Then you will get your pin number and go back in, it will have the same smart phone set up where you have to call back -- I mean you have to get the pin to go into the system. So there will be training on all of this and a lot of time for discussion, but you are just hearing about it with the rest of the crowd. It was just too premature to speak to anybody about it before.

Eugenia Cox: You know, the other concern I had, Katie mentioned the Portal isn't going to be just for ENs, but it seems the focus is on ticket payments and the majority of the state doesn't do ticket payments. When this rolls out, everybody will be accessible.

Desiree Fitzgerald: The only information you will have is the information we have in our master system. We have a stand-alone application that's installed on people's desk top, it's not part of our main frame system. So that is something that is on our schedule. We're procuring resources now to be able to put all of the VR cost reimbursement work into our side and it was mentioned on a couple of calls. We are just now competing for sites to do that. Right now as a VR agency, you will still be able to do the things you need to. The things that you do the awesome you will be able to do through the portal basically. You will be able to do your data files, information transfer, do your case QBER type data, take closed cases out with your data file transfer, you will be able to do your TPRs, everything you can do through the portal now pretty much, I think there are one or two exceptions, I think IVR goes away, the marketing file, that will be there the whole list of folks who are eligible.
You won't lose anything. We're looking at it as a service provider tool that will be available for you and it should pretty much need the needs that the current one today does.

Eugenia Cox: Well, my other concern is, too, I have heard from around the different states that you were up to November's claims, which has me a little concerned because a lot of us operate, you know, with getting some money in. I was concerned with this last case clearance report that came through. I mean the last report that came through of the nation's cost reimbursements. My concern was I looked at region 10 and there was 15,000 dollars paid out to our whole region and one state even lost money. So that tells me were there even any claims processed for region 10? And, you know, what I’m seen is some states you say you paid out a lot of claims but it seems like what you're doing is concentrating on certain states and everybody else gets ignored and then you concentrate on different states. The inconsistency as far as equal processing of equal (inaudible), I don't know, November of 2013 is a long time and that's way far behind and I was a little disappointed from the things we were told, you have more staff, you have more people processing, it just doesn't seem like it's moving very fast at this point. And like I said, looking at region 10, $15,000 to however many states are in region 10 is pretty bad. Like I said, I don't even know if any were processed. We didn't get anything at all. So we have concern as to what claims are you looking at, at this point? That really has some concern for me.
And then --.

Nate Arnold: Eugenia, it's almost hard to respond to that. Every month I mention the fact that we work the cases in the order that they come in. So if there were 15 cases worked for region 10 and that was a month in which region 10 didn't send many in, that's the only criteria for working cases.

Eugenia Cox: Okay, what you're saying is if we didn't process any that came in that month, we didn't send any in, in December we may have a bunch of payments.

Nate Arnold: Absolutely.

Eugenia Cox: You are processing them by when they come in.

Nate Arnold: Yeah, that has not changed.

Eugenia Cox: Then are you going to anticipate being caught up?

Nate Arnold: Probably, to be honest, possibly not until we have an automated processing system in terms of being what I would call caught up.

Eugenia Cox: Because I don't know about a lot of states, but we process our claims on a quarterly basis. And so that's a tough one because we don't send them in every month.

Nate Arnold: Like I said, let me know if you have anything pending that's older than that.

Eugenia Cox: The other thing, too, two more things. One thing is I put in inquiry requests that are several months old and I have never heard anything back on those about claims that have been processed.

Nate Arnold: Any time you have inquiries that don't get responded to, then you need to let me know personally.

Eugenia Cox: I've sent repeated requests, has anybody looked at this? I've mentioned it on calls and I still haven't heard back on the request I sent in.

Nate Arnold: Send it to me. At this point I think we really need to open the lines up to other people.

Operator: Our next question comes from the line of Carl Conners. Please proceed.

Carl Connors: I have a question about the -- maybe it's premature. Katie had mentioned we would be able to download reports in PDF format and I was wondering if we will also be able to download those reports in Excel format.

Nate Arnold: Actually, I don't know for sure. You may be able to. I think we'd better hold that one until we have Katie or another tech here who can answer that.