Operator: Good day, everyone. And welcome to the Quarterly All VR Call. Today's call is being recorded. And now, at this time, I'd like to turn the call over to Robert Pfaff. Please go ahead.

Robert Pfaff: Thank you. And good afternoon or good morning, depending on where you're calling from. We're thankful that you join us today for the Quarterly All VR Call. We have a couple of things that we would like to share with you. First, of all, just to let you know, as of today, we will be releasing information and a link to the summit report, the Employment Summit Report, stemming from the Employment Summit that we held back in November 2021. As you may or may not recall, we hosted the Bridges to Employment Summit, which was a virtual event, and the goal of the summit was to identify linkages between employers and Ticket to Work service providers, working with job-ready candidates. We had more than 200 representatives from Employment Networks, Vocational Rehabilitation agencies, employers, job placement and technical assistance organizations, and federal and state government agencies participating in the summit.

Jayme Pendergraft, who is going to speak right after me, will share more information about accessing the report. We would encourage you to share the report, take a look at it. There are things that we are working on and actively pursuing, as a result of the summit. One example is through the National Employment team Talent Acquisition portal, providing access to employment networks to get into the NETAP portal and share their beneficiary or their clients' resumes and so, forth, and access available jobs through the portal. So, more to come on those efforts, but you will see all that information detailed in the report. So, with that in mind, I'll go ahead and turn it over to Jayme, if you'd like to share some more information. Thanks.

Jayme Pendergraft: Thank you, Rob. This is Jayme Pendergraft. I am the Director of Communications and Outreach for the Ticket Program Manager. And as Rob just mentioned, we did announce today via GovDelivery at 11:22 Eastern Time that the report is available, along with an outreach toolkit. I'm waiting to see if we can provide a link through the webinar console, but I will tell you how to find it on the Your Ticket to Work website. You can find the report on the Your Ticket to Work website under Training and Events. And then you're going to go to the Events archive to download that report.

We also, developed a service provider toolkit and the toolkit includes sample content that service providers can use to develop newsletters, employer outreach messaging, and social media posts. And we do encourage you to share the report with your partners to build upon one of the summit's key themes, which was relationship development. The report is also a useful tool to raise employer awareness about the Ticket program. And we do have some sample content for you all to use, to connect with employers in the community. That toolkit is available under Resources and then Service Provider Outreach Toolkit, and it is called the Summit Report Toolkit. And again, that did go out via GovDelivery to everybody in iTOPSS at 11:22 this morning.

I'm now going to switch gears a little bit and talk to you about something called the Affordable Connectivity Program. This is a program that is managed by the Federal Communications Commission, and it's a benefits program that helps ensure that households can afford the broadband they need for work, school, healthcare and more.

This provides for a discount of up to $30 a month toward internet service for eligible households, and up to $75 per month for households on qualifying tribal lands. Eligible households can also receive a onetime discount of up to $100 to purchase computer equipment, like a laptop, a computer, or a tablet from participating providers if they contribute more than $10 and less than $50 towards the purchase price. This program is limited to one monthly service discount and one device discount per household.

So, who's eligible for the ACP? An eligible household is one with an income of at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines, or if a member of the household meets at least one of the criteria below:

*Someone must participate in certain assistance programs. These include SSI – so, some of your clients should certainly be qualified – SNAP, Medicaid, federal public housing assistance, WIC, or Lifeline.
*They participate in a tribal specific program, and these can include the Bureau of Indian Affairs General Assistance, Tribal TANF or Food Distribution Program on Indian reservations.
*A member of the household participates in the National School Lunch Program or the School Breakfast Program, including through the USDA community eligibility provision.
*Someone has received a federal Pell Grant during the current award year, or they meet the eligibility criteria for participating providers existing low income internet program.

So, why are we telling you about this? We want to get the word out to as many people as possible about the Affordable Connectivity Program. And we'd encourage you to share this with the people you talk to and also connect with the people who manage the content for your organization; so, your social media person, or someone who writes a newsletter for you. We want to get this into as many hands as possible so, that we can inform eligible ticket holders, and, of course eligible members of the public about this program. We do encourage you to familiarize yourselves with the program so, you can inform the people you meet with.

My slides do include 10 tips for outreach providers so, you can continue to share this in your community, and you can also, visit the Affordable Connectivity Program Consumer Outreach Toolkit, which does include a newsletter blurb. And again, we just encourage you to connect with your outreach or communications office. There are some great sample social media posts in that toolkit, newsletter information. And, again, it’s something that someone can just plug into what they're already writing if they have room in the newsletter, or it can help fill up a social media calendar, which is always a difficult task for people.

Lastly, in my presentation, we did write some sample social media posts for you all to just grab and copy and paste. I know that many of you may not be the correct person for the communications work, but feel free to share this with whoever needs it. And again, we encourage you to familiarize yourselves with this program.

And at that point, I will open it up for questions either about the Summit Report or the ACP. And I apologize, I do have one last thing to say. To find out more information about this. I do want to read the link and it is www.fcc.gov/acp. And that is the home of where you'll find eligibility information, the outreach toolkit, and a wealth of other resources. And sorry, operator, now I'm ready for questions.

Operator: Sure. If you'd like to ask a question, simply press the star key followed by the digit one on your telephone keypad. Also, if you're using a speakerphone, please make sure your mute function is turned off to allow your signal to reach our equipment. Once again, press star one, at this time. We'll pause for a moment.

As a reminder, it's star one to ask a question or make a comment.

And it appears there are no questions, at this time.

Jayme Pendergraft: This is Jayme. Thank you very much operator. I will go ahead and hand it over to Raquel.

Raquel Donaldson: Thanks so, much, Jayme. Good afternoon, everyone. I just have a few things to discuss today. First, probably most important is our fiscal year 2022 cost formula status. The email blast did go out yesterday to everyone that's on the VR distribution list. Before I discuss the cost formula, I do want to say if you did not receive that email, that means that you're not – your name, your phone number, your email address is not in the portal. If you would, please email me – email the VR help desk, we can get you put on there ASAP. I would just need your name, your email address and your phone number. And, of course, I'm pretty much sure – I'm pretty sure I would already know what VR you're with, but that's how that information is getting distributed. So, again, let me know, or VR help desk know – same person, me– if you did not receive that email yesterday, in regards to the cost formula.

So, just jumping straight in, fiscal year 2022 cost formula, we did get approval from management, upper management, to go ahead and use the ACP amount that we use for your VR's fiscal year 2021 cost formula. So, there's nothing that needs to be done on your end, except I will be sending out the cost containment policies. That's something that needs to be signed every fiscal year. So, that will be going out. I may be doing some type of approval letter in case you lost your ACP numbers, not sure about it. We'll be sending that information out as well. You should all receive that probably by – today's Tuesday – probably by Thursday. And if you guys could have that signed and dated and you can send it back to the VR help desk email, or directly to me, either way, as long as I have it. If I don't receive it within a week, I will be sending out reminders to my SSA coordinators and the director because that's something that we have to have every year.

As far as the cost formula being updated to the system, that hopefully should be done by the end of this week, next week at the latest. Anything that's being held, in regards to the cost formula, don't worry about it. As soon as that information, the data, is uploaded to the system, then we're going to have to make sure the technicians begin working on those claims that have been placed in diary because of the cost formula. So, we should be looking good by next week and you should start seeing those claims that are placed on hold that are in your diary, kind of trickle out. So, that's it. That's all I have for that. Again, if you have any questions, concerns you can ask at the end, or you can email the VR help desk in regards to the cost formula or the cost containment policies.

Next thing I have is the diary reminders. Effective immediately, we're actually going back to the pre-COVID policy in regards to the diaries. So, you have the 30 days for the late start of SGA, or if you need – if we request a breakdown of your direct costs, again, it's going to be 30 days. If you find that you need more time, please feel free to reach out to the VR help desk. That information will go to Katie, our branch chief, and then she will give you an approval or questions, whatever is needed. But again, just don't wait until after the 30 days has expired to request more time. Let us know and depending on what's going on in your VR, discuss that with Katie and we'll go from there.

PVRs remain the same. It's 75 days – it's 45 days initial and then I know it's – I believe it's 30 days additional time. So, that stays the same with the 75 days total for your PVRs.

Lastly, the State VR Directory. I've had some emails just asking about, is it posted somewhere, the State VR Directory? It's not – it's just for SSAs' use and for the VRs' use. And it's good if you want to reach out to other SSA coordinators, especially if you're new or you have questions that the VR help desk can't answer. So, that's what that is used for. In regards to offering and giving it out to other people, I would say don't do it. If they don't work inside the VR with you, do not give it to other people outside of the VR. And I believe that is all that I have right now. So, we can actually go ahead and open it up for Q&A, operator.

Operator: Sure. Again, if you would like to ask a question or make a comment, press star one at this time. We'll pause for a moment.

Star one to ask a question or make a comment.

And it appears there are no questions – actually, we do. We have a Eugenia Fox of State of Oregon.

Eugenia Cox: Actually it's Eugenia Cox. I had to call in to be able to ask a question because most of us are on the webinar and you can't ask a question on the webinar. I don't know if you guys knew that.

Raquel Donaldson: Hey, Eugenia, what's your question?

Eugenia Cox: Okay. Well, one is, I want to find out if you are going to be accepting electronic signatures on a permanent basis, because now that the world has changed, and people are less willing to come out into the community, we are going to be using electronic signatures more regularly. And we are wanting to know if that's going to be something that you're going to allow?

Raquel Donaldson: Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's not going to be an issue. Of course, that has to come from management, but because, just like you said, we know that you don't have access to folks like we used to, so, I don't see that in the future being an issue. If someone comes back later and says differently, then of course I would let everyone know. But as of right now, I definitely do not see that being an issue of accepting electronic signatures. That's a good question. Thanks.

Eugenia Cox: Yeah, because we need to get something in writing because I'm sure all of us are writing policies on electronic signatures. And if we have to try to get a wet signature, that's definitely more difficult than it was in the past. So, if somebody – if we can get some sort of decision, that would be great to help our policy teams.

And then my other question is, is SSA going to look at the possibility of allowing more time for claim justifications, similar to the PVRs? Because it takes us just as much time to locate the file and put it together for each of those. So, I'm not quite sure why one gives you more time versus the other, because, like I said, we still have to locate the file regardless of what we have to pull out of it.

Candice Whaley: Hi, Eugenia, this is Candice Whaley. To answer your question, the PVRs are basically an audit. That's why we give you extra time because we need to have proof of payment. We know sometimes that's hard to get, so, you have to go into either your archive or wherever you have to find all your information for the documentation. The other notice is basically if you know that the beneficiary is working more than a year from the VR closure date, then you should already have an IPE and documents ready to send in with your claim. That will avoid us having to diary your case for 30 days and sending you out a notice. So, if you can get a heads up on that, that would benefit you as well as SSA.

Eugenia Cox: Okay. And then the other thing is we are getting a lot of denials with the new ticket program manager. And one example that I have is that when we do provide a justification and then they turn around and they say that what you did wasn't good enough. I've never had that happen before. And the case in particular that I had was a severely – a person with severe disabilities, and many, and we spent three years with this person. So, I guess my question is the new ticket program manager that's reviewing our justifications, one, what are their qualifications to determine that the services we provided to stabilize an individual with the disability, what are their qualifications to be able to make that decision?

Candice Whaley: Okay, I can answer that for you as well. We've been having where you've had to send in documentation for late start of SGA for a long time, but because of the OIG audit, it has been more stricter on our end to make sure that the documentation is justifiable. In our situation, you have to have the cost aligned with the goal on the IPE. We need to know that you assisted the beneficiary on reaching a CP of SGA. We cannot just go by, okay, we helped this beneficiary. And five years later, they got a job that has nothing to do with the goal on the IPE at all. I understand there's circumstances when they can't get that job, but we should have amended IPEs along with your documentation so, that we know what you actually did. It's just changed. It's more strict and we just have to follow our policies as well.

Eugenia Cox: Yeah, but in this particular case, this person was going through a lot and a lot of our job is stabilizing a person with their disability. We're not just like an EN that just helps them write resumes. We do substantial counseling and guidance. We spend multiple times – you guys don't get to see the stops and start that we didn't submit a claim for. You are just looking at the one claim, but that person may have come in 10 times, needing some more counseling, but never made it to plan. So, that's more my –

Candice Whaley: Okay. – I'm sorry, go ahead.

Eugenia Cox: So, that's where I don't understand.

Candice Whaley: I was going to tell you to follow up with the VR help desk.

Eugenia Cox: What's that?

Candice Whaley: I'm sorry Eugenia. I had a – my phone had – went in and out. I wanted to tell you that if you have a specific situation with one case, please send that inquiry to the VR help desk. Again, you can send it to recon and send in additional information and we can look at it moving forward on a case-by-case basis. But we have to make sure that you helped this beneficiary reach a CP of SGA. So, if you have any documentation from a prior case, send that in with your justification and we'll look at all of that.

Eugenia Cox: Yes. But these aren't cases [inaudible] reached plan.

Raquel Donaldson: Sorry. This is Raquel. Eugenia, is this the one that you sent to the VR help desk for –

Eugenia Cox: Yeah. And I never got –

Raquel Donaldson: Okay. Yeah. Katie's on vacation, but I do know that she did receive it because I forwarded to her. So, when she returns, I'll definitely make sure she looks at it. And that's something that, Candice, if you have an opportunity, I can forward it to you as well, if you have time to look at it.

Candice Whaley: Sure. No problem.

Raquel Donaldson: Okay.

Eugenia Cox: Yeah. And really my question is, do you have actual – because we have physicians and professional counselors making determinations on what we could do to help this person stabilize. And we don't – And if I just have somebody who's in accounting looking at this, how are they able to make a determination that what we did for three solid years, didn't help this person in their lives?

Robert Pfaff: Eugenia, this is Rob.

Shada Roper: I'm sorry, this is Shada. Because we are the ones who trained the TPM, they are trained in making this decision and they're also trained to come to us before they make any decisions on such things where they can see things clearly like that. So, we're the ones who trained them to do those things.

Robert Pfaff: I just want to remind folks that this is a national call. If there's a specific issue that you want to pursue, we have a means of communicating with you directly. So, I suggest we take this offline and our folks will follow up with you.

Eugenia Cox: I did Rob. I sent it to them twice and I never got a response. That's why I'm bringing it up on the call.

Robert Pfaff: Okay. We'll get back to you.

Operator: And next we'll hear from Cheryl Vale, Division of Rehab in New Jersey.

Cheryl Vale: Hi, my question is a little bit off point from the majority of the discussion today. But in talking to two of my peers in Maryland and Virginia, they suggested I bring it up. I don't believe David or Eric are on. But many of us VRs are doing fee-for-service benefits counseling in some manner or another. And it's been brought to my attention, and I wanted to ask Social Security this, that there is a policy in offices that employees are rated on a point system and each type of work is given a certain amount of points and generating a BPQI garners zero points. And we're trying to figure out if this is true or not, because that might be one of the hold-ups in getting people counseling, which then leads to the employment and a successful ticket.

Robert Pfaff: I can try to take that. I don't know if one of the analysts wants to jump in, but I think Cheryl, what you're saying is in the field office, SSA field office, that the technician is not given a point for generating the BPQI to the requesting party. Is that correct?

Cheryl Vale: Yeah, they're basically – any work they do in regards to a BPQI request is not acknowledged or counted towards their performance. So, let's say you had somebody doing a lot of them. It makes it look like, in the end, when they calculate how much work they did that they didn't do anything because BPQIs are not given any point credit. And this, in itself, would be a disincentive for them to get those out to the requesters. We all know that this has been an ongoing issue with the delay, which also, sometimes we have consumers who quit their jobs or leave them just out of fear because we couldn't give them that education. So, I'm trying to find out first, if this is true and then how we can combat it. I know it's true in New Jersey, New York and I believe Nebraska.

Robert Pfaff: Yeah, I believe it is true. And I don't know exactly who makes – I assume that Operations makes the decision about how they score workloads in the field office. I have heard this in the past, so, I imagine that it is true and I agree that it can be a challenge. For our end, we would have to check with – and I do have a work incentives – we do have a team of Work Incentives policy experts that could probably weigh in on this much better than I can. But I don't know when that decision was made, why it was made and anything of that nature. But I think we would have people internally, if they were on the call, could provide more details.

The best thing I could tell you, it's a tough situation with BPQIs, we're aware of this. We hear this all the time. It's an operations issue. We're a program office. We're not affiliated with operations. The best advice we can give is to reach out to your local area Work Incentive coordinator, if you're having an issue, or reach out to us and we will process the request over to our contacts in Operations. So, in other words, if you're having a pattern of issues at a local office and you're seeing this repeatedly, and you've got some information you can share with us, specific information, about who your client was and so forth and what the issue is, we can forward that along and try to get it resolved through our internal channels.

Cheryl Vale: I appreciate that. And I know we have confronted this a few times. I am dealing with our regional representatives, but if this is true, that there is no credit given towards the worker to generate this BPQI, this could be the root of the issue for all of it.

Robert Pfaff: Yeah. I mean, I would agree. I don't know – again, I don't know anything about how Operations scores their workloads and what that looks like in a local field office. But we can take it back and maybe have somebody from our team who knows more about this get on and share some information. I don't know our ability to go back and request that they do that. I suspect it would be a tough sell internally. There's a lot of – in general, there's every – they do everything in the field office under the sun, from replacing a social security card to handling disability claims to retirement. And so, how they figure out what those priorities are, I cannot weigh in on and I agree that it would be nice if we could make that change within the agency. And I can find out some more information about what that would look like in terms of us making that request.

Cheryl Vale: Thank you.

Robert Pfaff: No problem.

Operator: And next we'll hear from Nina Maze of Colorado DVR.

Nina Maze: Good morning, everyone. Can you hear me?

Jayme Pendergraft: Hi, Nina. We can hear you.

Nina Maze: Awesome. Thank you. I don't speak at these meetings often, and I believe that's because our CSA VR work group that meets monthly ask that we have one or two spokespeople ask the pertinent questions that we all have or experiencing with issues. And most often that is Eugenia Cox. So, Eugenia, thank you so, much for always being able to present examples and represent our work group. And I just didn't know if Social Security was aware that that's what we do so, that our questions are answered. So, now that we have a new system that we're doing these meetings on, there isn't a way for us to type in questions or ask for additional responses pertaining to the questions that are being asked. So, I too have concerns about the 30 days for the justification request over the PVR 45-day request where I have to find files and do the additional work of justifying the documents and writing all of that out. And it does take me pretty darn close to the same amount of time as a PVR. So, I'd like to second her request to have that timeframe extended, if at all possible.

The other thing is it's nice to hear, in regards to justifications, that there has been a denial where we're all working on these pretty diligently in providing the documentation to show our justification. And I just have to say that we too have clients that we provide services for many, many, many years, and there isn't any way for us to know if these clients are taking our work and progressing individually with what we've provided them and moving on, if there's some sort of disconnect thereafter. But I can say that our experience has been, in all of our nation, is that our clients have to be handheld consistently. That's why we do that partnership, plus that's why we pass our clients onto the employment networks.

So, our work may start the process and it may end with an EN or it may end with help from friends and family for this client. And they may not be able to reach those SGA levels for years to come. And that stems from their motivation, it stems from their disabilities and capabilities and that also, stems from anything in their pathway that has helped them to get to that level. And I don't think that we should be discounted for that in our justifications. And it's hard for us to show you, other than just in words and the documentation from the case, why we believe that we should be receiving our cost reimbursements.

So, I hope that I haven't gone in total circles, but I just – I'd like Social Security to know that we do use these calls, these national calls and our representatives to bring up these questions so, that they get answered for all of us, not just the one individual, because we are here listening and we know what our agency circumstances are and what we're experiencing as well. And the CSA VR work group consistently – there's multiple of us that have the same issues consistently. So, those are the two things I wanted to touch base on. Thank you so, much for your time. And we do have

Operator: And we do have a follow-up from Eugenia Cox of State of Oregon.

Eugenia Cox: I did have an additional concern. I'm getting a lot of phone calls from folks that said they've called the help desk, the Ticket to Work help desk and, one, they've waited for a very long time to get ahold of somebody. But – and I did call the help desk to find out what they were hearing and these people didn't need employment services or to help to go back to work. What they needed was benefits planning services, but they can't get any assistance through the WIPA unless they call the help desk. And the only thing the help desk does is give them information on how to get ahold of the state VR agency. And when I called, I did hear that if you need benefits planning services or work incentive planning and assistance, it says to go to the website. Well, most of these people don't know what they need. So, I don't know what kind of training the help desk has been given to help determine whether they're needing benefits planning services, or assistance to go back to work.

So, we do get a lot of complaints that say they've had to wait and wait and wait to get to the help desk. So, now we're just avoiding sending people to the WIPA program because they can't ever get there. And so, we've been sending through our benefits planning services that are in our state.

Janelle Bratcher: Hi Eugenia, this is Jannelle, Director of TPM. So, first and foremost, I definitely want to acknowledge that call times were a little elongated but call times are coming down. So, I would definitely encourage you to please still send people to the helpline. At first, when you said help desk, I thought maybe you were speaking of provider, but I understand you're speaking about the help which services beneficiaries. So, definitely please, we encourage you to send people to still give us a call and you are correct, if someone calls in the call flow, if they understand what they're calling for and they select that option, great. But as you said, a lot of people aren't really sure of what options are available or what services they need. So, I would suggest that they call in and just hold for someone to provide assistance.

Eugenia Cox: Yeah. And, again, that's been – like I said, if the call times are going down, that's great. But again, a lot of them just don't know what they need. And I don't know if there were specific questions that can be asked. Do you just need help with your benefits to determine how working is going to help you or do you need help to go back to work? And I'm doing that screening. A lot of us are doing that screening to determine that they never needed our help to go back to work.

Janelle: And Eugenia, we also, have similar screening techniques. So, if they hold the line and they hold for representative, then that representative will screen them so, that we can determine what services need to be provided, whether that's a WIPA referral or etc. So, I would definitely encourage you to encourage them to give us a call on the helpline and hold until they can get a customer service rep to work with them.

Eugenia Cox: And usually we don't hear from them until after they've waited and they've called and that now they just want help. So, like I said, I'm just avoiding – a lot of us are just avoiding the WIPA program altogether because it's so, difficult to get to them. Thank you.

Operator: And it appears there are no further questions at this time.

Raquel Donaldson: All right. So, I just want to, again, thank everyone for taking the time out to be on this call. Quick reminder that our fourth quarter call – can't believe it's coming up on fourth quarter already – will be Tuesday, October 18th. It won't be the second Tuesday, it'll be the third Tuesday because I believe Columbus Day falls on the second week. So, we just want to make sure that everyone has the agenda and everything that they need. So, it will be Tuesday, October 18th, 1:00 PM, Eastern standard time. Again, if anyone has any additional questions or concerns that they didn't have addressed on the call, please reach out to the VR help desk. Otherwise, everyone enjoy the rest of your day. Thanks for calling in.

Operator: And that does conclude today's conference. Thank you all for your participation. You may now disconnect.