



**Consumer Council System of Maine**  
A Voice for Consumers of Mental Health Services

219 Capitol Street, Suite 7  
Augusta, ME 04330

Phone: 207.430.8300  
Fax: 207.430.8301  
Toll-Free: 877.207.5073  
www.maineccsm.org

## **CCSM Issues Development Committee Final Draft 4/13/2022**

### **The Issue:**

#### **What are CWICs and why they are so important for Maine's Mental Health Community**

Currently in Maine the amazing team of benefit counselors consist of only 6 employees to cover the needs of the entire State of Maine. We want to increase these positions so that we can support those individuals with disabilities that want to return to work and who face real or perceived barriers to employment.

We are hesitant to even tell our peers that this program exists because there are so few staff in this program to meet the need.

Maine has one of the lowest employment rates in the country of people with disabilities and we want to support our fellow peers who do want to return to work or try work for the first time armed with the right information on how the benefits system will support them in this endeavor. There is a lot of misinformation out there and people often tell us "I will lose everything" so they do not even try to work.

### **Recommendations:**

1. We recommend that the State of Maine invest in increasing the number of CWIC's from 6 to 16 over a period of several years to be completed by the end of 2025. This will allow more individuals to receive customized benefits information and advocacy (if needed) prior to an imminent return to work situation.
2. Misinformation about work and loss of benefits continues to be prevalent in the disability community. Without significant work to dispel the myths and stigma around returning to work we will not achieve higher employment rates for people living with disabilities.
3. Once we have more CWICs in Maine, we would fully support that there be an extensive public education campaign about this valuable resource. For example: written materials, social media, tv and radio, etc. It would be a helpful resource for our fellow Mainers who are on some type of disability program.
4. Recommend to the Social Security Administration to inform the people they serve about the CWIC program so that we have multiple pathways to get the information out to people.



- 
5. Look to embed CWIC's into a variety of locations. This would educate the staff as well as clients as to the role and services of CWICs. For example:
    - a. Career Centers
    - b. Vocational Rehabilitation Offices
    - c. Behavioral Health Agencies

## **Expected Outcomes:**

We would have a more robust resource for employment benefits education program in Maine. With more CWICs in Maine the wait time would decrease and there would be expanded access to this vital service. This would also benefit Maine's employer's needs by allowing more people to enter the workforce.

Background on This Program: Work Incentives are special rules that apply when a Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI, DWB, CDB) beneficiary or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipient returns to work. There are many different types of work incentives that may protect your eligibility for benefits including MaineCare or Medicare, and that may make you eligible for funding to advance your career. The rules are different depending on whether you receive SSI or Social Security for disability. If you receive both benefits, both sets of rules apply.

Benefits Counseling Services has Community Work Incentives Coordinators (CWICs) that help Maine people understand how working affects their Social Security disability and other public benefits. This service is provided at no cost to Maine residents 14 or older who receive Social Security disability benefits, are considering or currently working, and have questions about how working impacts benefits. This service is made possible through funding from the Maine Department of Labor's Bureau of Rehabilitation Services, the Maine Department of Health and Human Services, and the Social Security Administration.

<https://www.mainehealth.org/Maine-Medical-Center/Community/Vocational-Services/Benefits-Counseling>

---