

Benefits Counseling FAQ's Massachusetts Cultural Council Grant Program for Creative Individuals

1. What is a benefits counselor?

A benefits counselor has extensive training in public benefit programs including but not limited to Social Security's Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI); Medicare and Medicaid (called MassHealth in Massachusetts); local, state and federal subsidized housing; Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as Food Stamps; and Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC).

Work Without Limits benefits counselors have been trained and certified by Virginia Commonwealth University in conjunction with the U.S. Social Security Administration (SSA). Our job is to provide high quality counseling regarding the impact of income, earned or unearned, on an individual's public benefits. The benefits counselors who are working with the Mass Cultural Council have over thirty years of combined experience and work for ForHealth Consulting at UMass Chan Medical School. The Mass Cultural Council has contracted with UMass Chan to provide benefits counseling services for artists who have been selected to receive grants and have questions or concerns about how this income and any other income they may have could potentially affect their public benefits.

2. Do I need to fill out the Referral Packet to get the benefits counseling service?

Yes. The reason we ask you to complete a [Referral Packet](#) is for us to collect basic information about your public benefits, employment status, and living situation. This information enables our benefits counselors to provide you with the most accurate information possible regarding how the Mass Cultural Council grant may impact your benefits. Shortly after receiving your Referral Packet, our intake coordinator will contact you to schedule a meeting with one of our benefits counselors.

3. If needed, is there someone available to help me fill out the Referral Packet?

Yes. If you need assistance filling out the [Referral Packet](#), you can call us toll-free at 877-937-9675, Option 1 or email us at workwithoutlimits_benefitscounseling@umassmed.edu. Our intake coordinator will be more than happy to assist you. Please note that instructions on how to complete the Referral Packet along with our contact information is available on page 1 of the Referral Packet.

4. What does a benefits counseling meeting involve?

You will meet with a benefits counselor over the phone or Zoom, whichever you prefer. The benefits counselor will review the information you provided in the [Referral Packet](#), update any information as

needed, and discuss your concerns about how the grant may impact your public benefits. We will send you an invitation to this meeting via email. If you feel it would be helpful to have someone from your support circle join the meeting, please feel free to do so by informing the intake coordinator, so they can send them a meeting invite as well.

5. What if I need reasonable accommodation for the meeting, such as a Sign Language Interpreter or CART Reporter?

We are more than happy to arrange accommodations for you. Please let us know exactly what you need by emailing us at workwithoutlimits_benefitscounseling@umassmed.edu. There is also a section on the [Referral Packet](#) for you to request a reasonable accommodation.

6. Will you report to Social Security or any other public benefit agency that I am getting this grant?

No, we do not share your information with any public benefit agency. Our responsibility is to assist you. We are **not** mandated reporters, so anything you share with us is strictly confidential.

7. What is the Consent for Release of Information form on page 3 of the Referral Packet and how does it help?

Only individuals who receive SSI and/or SSDI need to complete and sign the Consent for Release of Information form found on page 3 of the Referral Packet. By doing so, you are giving us permission to contact the Social Security Administration (SSA) and request your Benefits Planning Query (BPQY). The BPQY is an official SSA report that verifies information such as the benefits you receive, when you started receiving them and how much you receive each month. The BPQY is an essential tool for our benefits counselors to provide you with the most accurate information, resources, and guidance possible. When we contact SSA to request your BPQY, we do not tell them why we are requesting it or anything else about your personal situation including the Mass Cultural Council grant.

8. What is the Massachusetts SSI State Supplement Program (SSP) Request for Access to SSP Recipient Record and Information form on page 4 of the Referral Packet and how does it help?

If you receive SSI monthly cash benefits, you most likely receive two payments - a larger one and a smaller one. The smaller payment is typically paid through the Massachusetts State Supplement Program (SSP). The amount you receive for your SSP payment is based on your living situation. By filling out the form on page 4 of the Referral Packet, we will be able to get a letter from the state verifying the amount you receive in SSP. This will allow us to verify that you are receiving the correct SSP amount to which you are entitled.

9. I am not receiving SSI or SSDI benefits; do I need to fill out the forms on pages 3 and 4 of the Referral Packet?

No. You must only fill out these forms if you receive SSI and/or SSDI benefits.

10. Will I receive written information regarding how this grant will affect my benefits?

Yes. Shortly after your meeting with a benefits counselor, you will receive a summary of the discussion along with relevant materials. If applicable, you will also receive a copy of your BPQY and the SSP benefits verification letter for your records.

11. How will you protect my personal information?

All information gathered by us for this project is kept in a secure folder on a UMass Chan Medical School server. Only those who need access to your information, such as our benefits counselors, have access to this folder. Additionally, any personal information we send electronically (email or fax) is done so through a secure and encrypted system. Lastly, our benefits counselors undergo a [Tier 2 Suitability Clearance](#) from the federal government so you can be assured we will hold your information in strictest confidence.

12. If I have further questions about my benefits, will I be able to speak to a benefits counselor again?

Yes. You will have access to a benefits counselor for the duration of UMass Chan's contract with the Mass Cultural Council, which is currently through June 30, 2024. Once that contract has ended, we have two additional [Benefits Counseling](#) programs that you may be able to access as well.