

Section 13: Social Security Work Incentive Programs

Programs History:

In 1935, Congress passed the Social Security Act to give retirement payments to people 65 and older.

Over time, the program grew to include more people and offers more benefits. In 1954, Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) was added to help workers who can't work because of a disability. In 1974, Supplemental Security Income (SSI) was added to help people with disabilities who don't qualify for regular Social Security.

In 1987, the Employment Opportunities for Disabled Americans Act became part of the Social Security Act. It encourages people with disabilities to work by offering programs like Impairment Related Work Expenses (IRWE), Plan for Achieving Self-Support (PASS), and Blind Work Expenses.

1. Impairment-Related Work Expenses (IRWE)

Program Purpose

The Impairment-Related Work Expense (IRWE) program helps people who receive Social Security benefits—either SSI or SSDI—by letting them deduct certain disability-related costs from their earnings. This helps them keep more of their benefits while working.

IRWE recognizes that people with disabilities often have extra expenses, such as assistive technology, medical care, or personal assistance. These costs can be subtracted from a person's gross income when Social Security decides how much they earn for benefit purposes. For SSI recipients, the deductions reduce their countable income. For SSDI beneficiaries, the deductions lower their earnings under the Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA) test, which helps them stay eligible for benefits longer after starting work.

An expense can be counted as an IRWE if it:

- You need the item or service to be able to work.
- You need the item or service because of your disability.
- You paid for it yourself and didn't get reimbursed by Medicare, Medicaid, or insurance.
- The cost is reasonable for your area.
- You paid for it in a month when you were working. (In some cases, Social Security may also allow expenses paid before you start or after you stop working.)

The Social Security Administration reviews each case to make sure expenses qualify, and they may ask for proof that the person paid for the items or services themselves.

Eligibility

- **Individuals receiving SSDI or SSI:** You must be a current recipient of one of these benefits due to a disability.
- **Disabled individuals under age 65:** For SSI, there are specific age-related requirements, though eligibility can continue after age 65 if you received SSI disability payments before then.

To be eligible for SSDI, a person must:

- Have worked and paid Social Security taxes (F.I.C.A.) for enough years to be covered under Social Security; some of the taxes must have been paid in recent years.
- Be considered medically disabled.
- Not be working or working but earning less than the Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA) level.

Services Provided

An IRWE lets you subtract the cost of disability-related expenses from your earnings. This helps Social Security decide if you are earning over the Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA) limit and allows you to keep getting SSI or SSDI benefits while working.

Examples of expenses you can deduct include:

- Assistive technology (for personal or work use)
- Attendant care services
- Prescription drugs
- Guide dog and related expenses
- Home or vehicle modifications
- Medical services
- Medical supplies
- Transportation costs related to your disability

Assistive Technology Covered

You may be able to deduct the cost of the following disability-related items or services if they are needed for you to work:

- **Assistive devices:** Hearing aids, communication devices, Braille equipment, or other tools needed to do your job.
- **Computer hardware and software:** Specialized programs or computer support services that help you work with your impairment.
- **Work-related equipment:** Tools or devices designed to meet your needs, such as one-handed typewriters, typing aids, or other adaptive tools.
- **Mobility aids:** Wheelchairs, braces, crutches, and other equipment that help you get to and perform your job.
- **Vehicle modifications:** Adaptive equipment or changes to your personal vehicle, like ramps, hand controls, or other modifications needed to get to work.
- **Guide dog and related expenses:** Costs for food, grooming, and veterinary care.
- **Home modifications:** Changes to your home needed for work, such as ramps, railings, wider doorways, or accessible workspace (indoor if you work from home, outdoor if you work elsewhere).
- **Medical devices:** Equipment such as pacemakers, respirators, traction equipment, hemodialysis machines, or wheelchairs.
- **Non-medical appliances or devices:** Items verified by a doctor as necessary to manage your condition, such as an electronic air cleaner.
- **Prosthetic devices:** Artificial arms, legs, hips, or other body parts used for medical—not cosmetic—purposes.

Problems Obtaining Assistive Technology

- The assistive technology must, in some way, enable the person to perform his/her job. If this is not demonstrated, the equipment cannot be deducted.
- Some individuals cannot afford to purchase costly assistive technology, and thus are unable to benefit from the program.
- In order for this method to be helpful, a person must pay for the assistive technology over a period of time. Many vendors require full payment at the time of purchase.

Application Process

You can apply for Social Security benefits at your **local Social Security Office**.

Be sure to bring your **Social Security number** and information about your **income and resources**.

If you have questions, call 1-800-772-1213.

To find an office near you, visit:

https://www.dcf.ks.gov/services/RS/Pages/SS_Offices.aspx

2. Plan for Achieving Self-Support (PASS)

Program Purpose

A Plan to Achieve Self-Support (PASS) allows a person with a disability to set aside income and/or resources to reach a specific work goal. Money or property set aside under an approved PASS does not count toward the \$2,000 SSI resource limit. This allows individuals to keep SSI benefits while working toward independence and self-support. You cannot use SSI cash benefits themselves for a PASS. However, you may use other income or resources such as Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), Veterans' benefits, Workers' compensation, or Inheritance/personal funds.

Updated Social Security Administration (SSA) Guidelines (2025): Work goals must be realistic and achievable, usually at an entry or mid-level position, unless you can show that a higher-level goal is necessary to achieve self-support. PASS applicants must also demonstrate a clear plan showing how they will meet their work goal, with specific steps and milestones.

PASS Requirements

- Be designed especially for the person.
- Be in writing.
- Have a specific work goal which the person is capable of performing.
- Have a specific time frame for reaching the goal.
- Show what money and other resources will be used to reach the goal.
- Show how the money and resources will be used.
- Show how the money set aside will be kept identifiable from other funds.
- A PASS may not cover installment payments. Usually a PASS is developed for an 18-month period, but extensions may be obtained.

- A PASS must be **in writing** and submitted using the official **SSA-545 form** (<https://www.ssa.gov/forms/ssa-545.html?utm>).

Updated SSA Guidelines (2025): A PASS can cover startup costs for a business or job but not ongoing expenses unless ongoing support (like job coaching) is needed. Business-related PASS plans must include a detailed business plan. Expensive items like vehicles may be covered for a down payment only; installment payments cannot be covered.

Approval Process

The Social Security Administration (SSA) must review and approve the PASS before it goes into effect. Each SSA region has a PASS Cadre (specialist) who reviews, approves, or denies PASS applications. Once approved, your PASS will be reviewed regularly to ensure funds are used correctly and progress is being made toward your goal.

Who Can Help Develop a PASS

You can write your own PASS or get help from:

- Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) counselors
- Independent Living counselors
- Social workers or benefits specialists
- Employers or job coaches
- Work Incentive Planning & Assistance (WIPA) staff

These partners can help you identify your work goal, estimate costs, and prepare your PASS application.

Eligibility

To qualify for a PASS, you must be disabled or blind as defined by Social Security, receive SSI (or be eligible if not for excess income/resources), and have a specific, realistic work goal that will help you become self-supporting.

Services Provided

A PASS can help you save money to pay for expenses directly related to your work or self-support goal. Examples include:

- Assistive technology or adaptive equipment
- Starting a business (startup costs, equipment, supplies)
- Tuition or training for education or vocational programs
- Books, software, or tools needed for training or work
- Childcare costs related to employment

- Home modifications for accessibility (related to employment)
- Specialized clothing or safety gear
- Vehicle modifications or transportation equipment

Updated SSA Guidelines (2025): PASS funds may only cover new work-related expenses necessary to reach your goal. Previously existing costs can only be included if the expense increases because of your work plan.

Assistive Technology Covered

The following are examples of assistive technology items that may be included in a PASS plan (this list is not all-inclusive):

- **Adaptive equipment:** augmentative communication devices, Braille equipment, electronic visual aids, modified tools, telecommunication devices (TTYs).
- **Home modifications:** ramps, railings, widened doorways, or dedicated workspace (for home-based employment).
- **Medical and mobility devices:** wheelchairs, scooters, or mobility aids.
- **Prosthetics:** artificial limbs, hips, or other medical devices necessary for employment.
- **Vehicle modifications:** hand controls, lifts, or adaptive driving aids.

Problems Obtaining Assistive Technology

Technology must be clearly tied to your ability to perform your job or work goal. Some people cannot afford assistive technology before the PASS is approved. Many vendors require full payment up front, and since installment payments are not covered, this can be challenging.

Application Process

1. Complete the PASS application (Form SSA-545, 07-2025 edition) from ssa.gov/forms/ssa-545.html
2. Submit your complete plan to your local Social Security Office.
3. A PASS Cadre (regional specialist) will review your plan.
4. SSA will approve or deny your plan based on whether it is complete, feasible, and follows guidelines.

Additional Resources

- SSA PASS Overview: ssa.gov/disabilityresearch/wi/pass.htm
- PASS Fact Sheet: choosework.ssa.gov/library/fact-sheet-plan-to-achieve-self-support

- Kansas SSA Offices: dcf.ks.gov/services/RS/Pages/SS_Offices.aspx
General SSA Questions: 1-800-772-1213

3. Blind Work Expenses

Program Purpose

The Blind Work Expenses (BWE) work incentive applies to individuals who are blind and receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI). It allows certain work-related expenses to be excluded from countable income when SSA calculates monthly SSI benefits.

The BWE incentive applies only to SSI. People who are blind but receive Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) may qualify for a different work incentive called Impairment-Related Work Expenses (IRWE).

To qualify as blind, a person must meet SSA's definition: central visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye with best correction, or a visual field limitation such that the widest diameter subtends an angle no greater than 20 degrees.

SSA Blindness Definition: <https://www.ssa.gov/disability/professionals/bluebook/2.00-SpecialSensesandSpeech-Adult.htm>

Eligibility

- Receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments due to statutory blindness.
- Be under age 65 OR be 65 or older and have received SSI payments for blindness before turning 65.
- Be earning income from work.

Services Provided

The BWE work incentive allows individuals who are blind and working to deduct the cost of certain work-related expenses from their earnings when determining SSI eligibility and payment amounts.

Examples of allowable Blind Work Expenses include:

- Assistive technology used for employment
- Transportation to and from work
- Federal, state, and local income taxes
- Social Security payroll taxes

- Attendant care services needed for work
- Meals consumed during work hours
- Professional association fees and union dues

BWE Fact Sheet: <https://choosework.ssa.gov/library/fact-sheet-work-incentives-for-people-who-are-blind>

Assistive Technology Covered

The following are examples of assistive technology which may be counted as Blind Work Expenses (this list contains examples and is not intended to be all inclusive):

- Guide dog expenses, including food, veterinary care, and licensing fees.
- Visual and sensory aids, such as magnifiers, screen readers, or refreshable Braille displays
- Braille translation services or materials translated into Braille
- Adaptive computer hardware or software used for work

Application Process

You can apply for SSI benefits or report Blind Work Expenses through:

1. Your local Social Security Office – Find offices in Kansas here: https://www.dcf.ks.gov/services/RS/Pages/SS_Offices.aspx
2. SSA Online Services – <https://www.ssa.gov/benefits/ssi/>
3. By phone: Call 1-800-772-1213 (TTY 1-800-325-0778)

You will need your Social Security number, proof of blindness or visual impairment, and documentation of work-related expenses (receipts, invoices, etc.).

Appeals Process for IRWE, PASS, and BWE

If you disagree with the Social Security decision, you can **appeal** (ask for a review). You must **send your appeal in writing within 60 days** after you get the letter of the decision.

There are **four steps** in the appeal process:

1. Reconsideration

- Your case will be reviewed by someone who was not involved in the first decision.
- They will look at all the information again and decide if the first decision should stay the same or be changed.
- You will get a letter explaining the new decision.

2. Hearing

- If you don't agree with the reconsideration decision, you can ask for a hearing.
- A judge (called an Administrative Law Judge) will lead the hearing.
- You will get a letter with the date, time, and place of the hearing.
- You can speak for yourself or have someone represent you.
- If you can't attend, you must tell Social Security in writing.
- The judge will make a decision based on the information already in your file and any new information you share.

3. Appeals Council Review

- If you disagree with the judge's decision, you can ask the **Social Security Appeals Council** to review it.
- The Appeals Council looks at all requests but may decide **not** to review your case if it agrees with the judge's decision.
- If it does review your case, it can either make a new decision or send your case back to the judge for another review.
- You will get a letter explaining what the Appeals Council decides.

4. Federal Court Action

- If you don't agree with the Appeals Council's decision—or if they decide not to review your case—you can file a lawsuit in Federal District Court.