

STAY ORGANIZED

When you receive benefits and services from agencies, you need to know certain information in order to work with them. When you work or live on your own, the amount of information you must keep grows. It is crucial for you to figure out a way to keep track of all your personal information.

Collect your personal information (names, addresses, phone numbers, identification (ID) numbers, medical and medication, housing, employment, tax, . . . in one place. Set up a simple filing system you will follow. (Get file folders, put it in a box on your closet shelf, stuff it in a particular drawer.) The key question is: "Will you follow the system you set up?"

Most of the time, being organized is a pain, BUT you must be able to find the information when you need it. It will be much simpler to get useful help when you need it if you stay organized.

COLLECT PAPER

Organizations and agencies produce a great deal of paper. Your ability to produce a certain piece of paper is often the key to accomplishing something. Most of the thick files professionals bring to meetings are full of paper about you. Get in the habit of asking for copies of anything on paper that is about you and save it. Make sure you actually get the copies you request.

If an agency requests information from you, KEEP A COPY of what you give them (and note the date you gave it to them on your copy).

A lot of paper may never be important but the act of requesting it conveys that you are being watchful and prepared. Agencies and systems run on paper and when you need to get something done or have a problem, you will need to have paper too.

KEEP NOTES

Did you ever notice . . . when you go to a meeting, everyone takes notes but you, the person the meeting is about? Keeping notes will help remind you of what happened and who was supposed to do what. Notes also serve as a record of information that you might need later. Make simple notes when you talk to someone about something important. *Example: 6/19/02, Mr. Jones -- asked for a change in program.*

Take names and numbers! Keep track of the names and numbers of people who help you and people who are your contacts with agencies and services.

PUT IT IN WRITING

Whenever you ask for something, want an answer or are seeking some other result, **PUT YOUR REQUEST IN WRITING.** Writing makes your request paper. (We have already discussed the importance of paper.)

All you need to write is -- who it's to, the date, your request, and sign it. Your request is almost certain to be taken seriously and likely to receive a speedier response.

ASK QUESTIONS

The best way to figure out how to accomplish something or how to solve a problem is by asking questions. Don't be afraid that you are asking a *dumb* question. Asking questions to obtain information you need is always a smart thing to do.

You will receive the most helpful answers if you think about your question and if you ask the right person the right question. Asking questions also helps you to compare answers (Did you get the same answer from more than one source?) and to find out who knows what.

IDENTIFY

RESOURCES

By asking questions you will begin to identify people and organizations who know about certain things and can be counted on to reliably answer certain types of questions. These are your resources. Respect your resources by only using them when you need them, by not wasting their time and by showing appreciation for their help.

TAKE A FRIEND TO MEETINGS

Meetings about you, under the best of circumstances, can be frustrating and intimidating. You may feel it is a whole lot of them against you. If you take a friend, you'll feel less this way. It is helpful to have a witness and someone to discuss impressions with after. The person who goes with you need not know about "the system". The other people know about the system, your friend is there to help you.

Most agencies also have a procedure by which you can appoint a person to represent you. Ask about this if you are having difficulty and want another person to act for you. (Remember, anything you can "Okay" you can "UnOkay".)

"STOP!!!"

When you are not happy with a decision being made or when the discussion becomes overwhelming or when you are uncomfortable with the way a meeting is going or when you just don't know what to do next, . . . Just say: "Stop".

The decisions, discussions, meetings and plans are all about you. It is perfectly appropriate for you to ask for time to think things over. Tell them when you will respond and schedule another meeting if necessary.