

SHIP Counselor Superheroes Inform SHIP Center Work



Ginny Paulson
SHIP TA Center Director

Through a nomination process with SHIP directors nationally, the SHIP TA Center formed a work group of SHIP counselors that met monthly from January through August 2022. Its purpose was to help the SHIP TA Center better understand the day-to-day work of SHIP counselors and inform SHIP TA Center training and technical assistance, particularly regarding counseling “soft skills” (interpersonal communication).

With the knowledge gained from the SHIP Counselor Work Group, the SHIP TA Center is developing a self-paced online soft skills course and is rewriting a [counseling companion guide](#) – originally developed for the COVID-19 Toolkit – with real-life SHIP counseling scenarios. We are also including the counselor perspective in events and newsletter articles. For example, work group member Chris Merriweather from Kansas spoke in the August 29, 2022, webinar [Navigating Challenging Client Contacts](#); Shannon Jensen from Idaho wrote about hosting counselor debrief sessions in [Debrief for AEP Relief is a Gift for Counselors](#); and counselors Ann Roth (FL), Fran Oberne (FL), Nick Ross (FL), and Kris Winterowd (NM) are representing SHIP to AARP audiences this month as part of our national SHIP awareness collaboration with AARP.



Read on to learn about these counselors’ superpowers!

There were several unanticipated outcomes from this inaugural SHIP counselor work group. We realized that supporting counselors’ professional well-being is integral to supporting soft skills, such as when counselors encounter suicidal callers or potentially violent clients. Counselors also expressed a need to be heard and to have a chance to debrief with someone or with a group of peers, particularly during the busy fall open enrollment. Though the SHIP Center’s primary goal was to learn about real-



Check out the Zoom group photo at the end of this article.

life SHIP counseling for the development of soft skills training, some “hard skills” – Medicare content knowledge – were also discussed. We learned that the CMS Unique ID program is vital to SHIP counselor work, and it is a highly valued tool by work group members. We also learned that counselors benefit from understanding how Medigaps work in other states because they counsel beneficiaries who are relocating.

SHIP counselors are our “Medicare Marvel” superheroes! We are grateful to the 13 who volunteered their time to participate in our work group. Several responded to our request for them to identify their superpowers and share some proudest moments.

Anne Roth, Florida volunteer

Superpowers: Analytical and patient

Proudest moment: When I have a client who doesn’t see the light at the end of the tunnel, but after we work together and they come up with a plan, they feel good about themselves at the end of the session.

Fran Oberne, Florida volunteer

Superpower: Making connections. I believe I help the beneficiary understand my purpose is to be here to help meet their needs. For them to be comfortable with me to share their needs and know I will do my best to achieve meeting those needs.

Proudest moments: They are many. Each time I’ve made a lasting impact on someone is very special. I do enjoy when I am referred to as an “angel.”

Jessica Lippert, Pennsylvania paid staff

Superpower: Patience. Being able to help calm an overwhelmed client so they can be confident enough to make important decisions.

Proudest moment: Saving clients money, especially when they are struggling. Last year, I helped a woman who didn’t use any prescriptions change Part D plans. She was enrolled in a plan with a \$84/month premium, which was more costly than she needed.

John Garrahan, Rhode Island paid staff

Superpower: Active listening

Proudest moment: Setting up a call center during the 2020 Open Enrollment Period with nine amazing volunteers willing to

still help clients during COVID-19. I could not have asked for better people to work with. It just made me so proud to be a part of that team and to be working with people that are giving up their time to take the training and help their community.

Karen Gaudian, Connecticut paid staff

Superpowers: Being able to listen and validate people's concerns. It is extremely rewarding to have people walk out of your office happy and confident after arriving with so much concern and anxiety.


Proudest moments: These are definitely due to my volunteer counselors. The level of commitment a volunteer brings to this program is really profound. They take a five-day training on Medicare, they complete a bunch of paperwork, get a background check, and take an exam to get certified. Then they commit to additional trainings and meetings throughout the year just so they can volunteer their time to help other people navigate their way through the Medicare quagmire. There is a lovely sense of accomplishment at the end of this. Also, there are not words to describe the feeling of being able to help someone suffering from cancer navigate the different options for coverage and find a prescription plan for their medications when they thought they were going to have to get a reverse mortgage on the house to stay alive.

Miriam Maer, Florida volunteer

Superpower: Interest in and ability to research issues and follow up with clients by email or by returning their calls.

Proudest moment: I was able to assist a low-income man whose wife needed to be in a facility because of her Alzheimer's disease. Through our Medicare counseling sessions, I learned that he was taking two buses to get to her every day. He was taking her the diapers that he had to pay for. I couldn't help him with all the housing and legal issues that came up, but at least I was able to help him talk with the facility and keep his wife from being transferred to a windowless room. Looking out her window was important to her well-being. He told me he was so thankful that when he says his prayers at night, he remembers me in his prayers. That was very significant to me. How often does a complete stranger remember somebody like me in their prayers, you know?

"He told me he was so thankful that when he says his prayers at night, he remembers me in his prayers. That was very significant to me." – Miriam Maer

Miriam Taub, New Jersey volunteer**Superpower:** Persistence**Proudest moment:** It's really not about me and feeling proud, but what makes me really feel good is when I'm communicating with the client and somehow like the light goes on and they sort of get it, like they understand.**Nick Ross, Florida volunteer****Superpowers:** Being able to transition to telephone counseling because of COVID-19 and learning to communicate well only by phone and without my usual visual aids and charts that I had relied on to help visual learners in person.**Proudest moment:** There was a lady who had stopped her cancer treatment because she was afraid that she was going to get billed. I was able to get that sorted out and get her back on treatment and on schedule.**Rebecca Pogorelski, Missouri volunteer****Superpower:** Listening well to understand the problem. (Some in Missouri think my superpower is my pharmacy background.)**Proudest moments:** Saving clients money; I have helped clients save thousands of dollars a year and that I know is meaningful to them. Meaningful to me are two things: getting a referral from someone I helped and having someone tell you they have included me in their prayers.**Shannon Jensen, Idaho paid staff****Superpower:** I have been told I am disarming.**Proudest moment:** A 72-year-old beneficiary moved from Alaska to Idaho in June and needed a prescription filled that was very expensive in Idaho. She had not enrolled in Part D, so no Special Enrollment Period (SEP) was available. When she mentioned that her budget was very tight, I was able to help her apply for a Medicare Savings Program (MSP), and she was approved for the Qualifying Individual (QI) program. She then had an SEP to get into a \$0 premium Part D plan. Her expensive prescription was then only \$9.80, her Medicare Part B premium would be paid on her behalf through the MSP program, and she was reimbursed for two months of Part B premiums. That was a fantastic day!


*"I have helped clients save thousands of dollars a year and that I know is meaningful to them."
– Rebecca Pogorelski*

Marna Schirmer, Connecticut volunteer

Superpower: I think being able to demystify Medicare and all its options. Most clients have no idea on the workings of Medicare. Helping them understand these workings is my job and I am very happy to be able to give this assistance.

Proudest moment: It will always be saving a client a substantial amount of money by helping them change their coverage. ➡️



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