

Best Practices in Employment Programs for Chronically Homeless

Status

The combination of political forces at work today including: the focus on ending chronic homelessness, the push for HUD Homeless Assistance funds to provide permanent supportive housing rather than supportive services, and the continuing threats to cash benefits from entitlement programs, has caused renewed focus on employment strategies for people who are chronically homeless.

For example, in 2003, HUD and DOL collaborated to fund an initiative in five U.S. communities to help individuals who have been chronically homeless obtain housing and employment through the workforce development system. In San Francisco, a program, Hope House, was funded to provide Housing First/Work First services using scattered site HUD supportive housing to implement “vocationalized” housing to a representative group of individuals that were formerly chronically homeless. The program was designed (a) to coordinate service delivery, including among employment staff, housing case managers, vocational rehabilitation staff, a general assistance worker and One-Stop Career Center staff, and (b) to improve the workforce development system, including the One-Stop Career Centers, and employment options for this population.

People who are chronically homeless face a number of different hurdles to employment. Work Fast or Work First, one employment policy strategy, like Housing First, is designed to meet people where they are. Work First, paired with Housing First at the Hope House project, requires strong, integrated services and supports for consumers from outreach until long into the housing experience. These services include mental health services, substance use services, and other types of support.

Work Fast programs are client-driven and emphasize choice for the consumers. Each consumer has different needs and preferences, so the program requires significant flexibility. Many homeless people are already working in some capacity to create some income stream, so Work Fast also proposes redefining what is “job ready,” what is “work,” and further, what is “success.” Work Fast recognizes the skills and strengths that consumers bring and allows for a lot of flexibility and customization.

Customized employment means individualizing the employment relationship between employer and employee to meet the needs of both. This strategy involves determining the strengths, requirements and interests of a person with a complex life. Customized employment builds on strategies like supported employment and self-employment, and pairs them with services and support. It begins with an in-depth job seeker- led assessment process, and may be followed by a negotiating process with an employer, that could involve job carving (that is, individualized job design), negotiating a job description, job creation and job sharing, job supports or flexibility in hours and location of job.

The Work Fast approach improves self-esteem and confidence, facilitates motivation to change, creates a sense of stability and establishes trust in self and others.

Outreach for Work Fast begins with talking with the consumer about his or her likes or dislikes and listening to his or her stories to start the consumer thinking about possibilities. From the beginning, the program should provide a standing offer of work, or in-house jobs, as not every moment is a competitive job placement moment (e.g., because the consumer may not be able to pass a drug test). To make this work, the whole organization must support and assume employability. The program must find internal and external partners and the employment process should not require lengthy prerequisites or training. The program should have a variety of jobs for people with different needs or interests.

Many consumers may feel hopeless, have negative experiences with employment, think of the jobs historically available to them as being boring or stifling, be experiencing depression or other dampers to their motivation, or have concerns about effects of employment on his or her benefit. Nonetheless, when staff focus on motivation as something that can change, act as an ally, and encourage recovery, change and growth, work may become more interesting to them. Staff should be supportive without being demanding or judgmental, or over-involved. Making work opportunities visible and available helps, with activities and resources to support employment.

The six principles of Work Fast are that:

- competitive employment is the ultimate goal,
- eligibility is based on consumer choice,
- employment services are integrated with mental health treatment and other services,
- the job search process starts immediately after the consumer expresses an interest,
- support continues for employed consumers, and
- choice.

Work Fast requires assertive engagement and outreach, integration with other services, choice and individuality, flexibility and support.

Resources for Additional Information

- Housing First/Work Fast PATH Audio Presentation, Ann Denton and Gary Shaheen from Advocates for Human Potential, September 5, 2006.
- Ending Chronic Homelessness Through Employment & Housing, A Leadership Dialogue, January 25, 2006.
- Ending Chronic Homelessness Through Employment and Housing: Brief Project Descriptions, Chronic Homelessness Employment Technical Assistance Center, June 2006.
- “*Work as a Priority*”- <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/SMA03-3834/default.asp>

- “*Creating Change: Pushing Workforce Systems to Help Participants Achieve Economic Stability and Mobility*”-Annie Casey Foundation-July 2002
<http://www.aecf.org/>
- “*Economic Engagement: An Avenue to Employment for Individuals with Disabilities*” - Institute for Community Inclusion-2004
www.communityinclusion.org
- “*Innovative Methods for Providing Vocational Rehabilitation Services to Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities*”- RSA/George Washington University -
<http://www.gwu.edu/~iri/psg.htm>
- “Profiles of One Stop Career Centers Serving Homeless Persons” at
www.csh.org/CHETA

Resources on the Web

- www.dol.gov/odep
- <http://www.psych.uic.edu/eidp/eidptoolkit.htm>
- www.samhsa.gov