

HUD EMPLOYMENT LECTURE SERIES
Lecture #7 Pamphlet
EMPLOYMENT RETENTION:
CUSTOMIZATION AND OTHER STRATEGIES

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INTRODUCTION

Fare Start is a restaurant in Seattle that has the social mission of hiring and training people who are homeless. Fare Start collaborates with a “guest chef” from a local restaurant each Thursday night. Participants in the culinary training program have the opportunity to work with some of the city’s premiere chefs to produce three-course meals, the proceeds of which go to fund Fare Start’s activities. Participants learn from the best in the business, and the chefs often hire away the social enterprise’s participant-employees.

Bayaud Industries in Denver establishes “supported job sites” for people with disabilities, including those who are homeless, within an employer’s workforce. The program contracts with private employers to provide on-site services to the program’s participants, who perform work for the employer, usually for three to four months, with the goal of transitioning to permanent, full-time work. The employer benefits because it has its own “temp agency” that provides employees at a much lower cost than traditional temp agencies. Participants benefit because they are expected to meet the employer’s performance expectations and thus develop needed skills, yet the employer agrees to act with compassion and understanding of the participants’ challenges.

Both Fare Start and Bayaud Industries have found innovative solutions to what is so often a problem in employment services for people who are homeless: retention. Placing people into jobs is only the first step: if people are to attain economic independence and reap the other benefits of working, they must have a realistic opportunity to remain in the workforce long-term.

This pamphlet and the supplemental audio lecture offer specific strategies for boosting the retention of homeless people placed into employment. Employment retention is defined broadly to include three key programmatic goals of employment services:

- Job retention, or keeping the same job
- Workforce attachment, or keeping some form of employment over a long period of time
- Career advancement, or gaining employment that provides higher wages, needed benefits, and personal satisfaction

Retention can be a challenge, and it might not even be an overt program goal, particularly for programs that have rapid placement into employment as a primary goal. Many of the same challenges to placing people who are homeless also pose challenges to retention:

- Mental illnesses
- Substance abuse
- Ex-offender status
- Lack of education or training
- Poor interpersonal skills
- Anger issues

Despite these and other issues, some basic steps before, during, and after job placement can help to ensure that a participant maintains employment, whether in the same job, the same field, or in a better job.

Retention starts with a placement based on careful evaluation of the participant’s skills, interests, and barriers, and a candid discussion about how the participant can plan in advance to retain the job over time. Helping the participant get off on the right foot and adjust to the culture of the workplace also boosts retention. Finally, evaluating and supporting the self-evaluation of workplace performance helps the participant adjust to new responsibilities. Throughout these steps, motivational interviewing techniques can help the participant make self-observations and develop motivation to change.ⁱ Each of these topics is discussed in greater detail throughout the following pages.

Interviews were conducted with providers offering various types of employment services, including supported employment, customized employment practices, linking with the local workforce development system, social enterprises, and work-readiness approaches. Staff members of programs located across the United States have offered insight into how programs can boost retention rates for formerly homeless participants placed into employment.

Intended Audience

This pamphlet and companion lecture will benefit those who provide services to the target population described below, including the following:

- Case managers
- Staff of transitional and permanent housing

- Employment specialists at One-Stop Career Centers and other workforce development centers
- Employment specialists at homeless assistance agencies
- Program managers

Target Population

The strategies described in this pamphlet and companion lecture serve a variety of people who are homeless or living in transitional or supportive housing. Depending on program and location, clients include families, single men and women, chronically homeless people, people with disabilities, adolescents, veterans, and people with criminal histories.

SERVICE MODELS THAT SUPPORT RETENTION

Service providers follow a variety of models for providing employment services to people who are homeless. Such models include customized employment, supported employment, linkages with the workforce system, social enterprises, and traditional work-readiness approaches. Most of the programs interviewed for this pamphlet, while identifying primarily with one of these program models, offered services typical of several of these models. These approaches vary significantly but each has some features that naturally support retention, even if retention is not always a highly emphasized program goal.

Customized Employment

Customized employment is a relatively new approach to helping people with disabilities, including those who are homeless, find and maintain employment.¹ Using motivational interviewing techniques, staff tries to get a complete picture of an individual's skills, special gifts, interests, and motivations. Staff then helps develop a person-centered employment plan.

¹ The Office of Disability Employment Policy, U.S. Department of Labor maintains a library of publications about customized employment at http://www.dol.gov/odep/categories/workforce/cust_emp.htm.

Based on these plans, customized employment staff tries to match unmet employer needs with participants' skills and interests by developing individualized job descriptions including only duties the participants is capable of performing. The model uses specific techniques for creating customized job descriptions:

- In job-sharing, one or more individuals share a specific job's complete responsibilities.
- In job-carving, specific responsibilities of a job are segregated and turned into a unique job.
- In job negotiation, the specific structure, expectations, and tasks of a job are negotiated between the employer, participant, and employment specialist.

Each of these techniques results in a job description that takes unwanted or time-consuming duties away from other employees, boosting their productivity and thus benefiting the employer. At the same time, the employee is set up for success in a job that matches his or her unique skill set.

Supported Employment

Supported employment is an evidence-based practice² for linking people with disabilities, including those who have been homeless, to "competitive" employment (i.e., competing against candidates without disabilities for identical jobs). The model relies upon a rapid job search without extensive training or preparatory work. If needed, a "job coach" provides the participant with ongoing support, either at the place of work or outside of work. This support might include modeling tasks for the participant or mediating discussions with supervisors or co-workers. Emphasis is placed on an integrated services team approach,

² The model has been widely studied and certain key elements have been identified. Materials are available to assist in following these key elements so that effectiveness can be maintained. See Center for Mental Health Services. (n.d.). *Supported Employment KIT*. Rockville, MD: Author. Draft available online at <http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/communitysupport/toolkits/employment/default.asp>

in which supporting a participant's employment goal is seen as a significant part of the overall treatment plan.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of supported employment programs is directly linked to retention. Supported employment is unique in that it provides follow-along supports with no time limits in whatever frequency participants need them. One program does not "close" any participants' files but might (at the case manager's discretion) put participants on "inactive" status if they miss three consecutive appointments. At that point, the participant will need to initiate contact with the program if he or she wants services or wants to return to active status, but returning to the program is always an option.

Follow-along supports are often provided by mental health staff, but participants are also encouraged to integrate mainstream supports such as one's church, family members, spouse, friends, or other colleagues into the overall support system. Typically, programs use frequent phone contact and in-person meetings with participants, including at the job site if desired by the participant.

Another supported employment program encourages those who are working successfully to stay in contact, even if they do not feel that they need services. To help encourage contact, the program provides "alumni" with laminated wallet cards that list the services available from the program and contact numbers for staff.

Linkages to the Workforce Development System

Increasingly, programs serving people who are homeless are focusing on employment by linking program participants to local workforce development systems.³ Homeless assistance staff coordinates with staff of local One-Stop Career Centers, especially Disability Program Navigators (DPNs),⁴ who have expertise in assisting people with disabilities find employment, and who can also advise them about the

³ For information about the workforce development system, see <http://www.careeronestop.org/>.

⁴ For more on the DPN program, see DTI Associates (2007, April) *Fact Sheet: Disability Program Navigator Initiative*. Arlington, VA: Author. Available online at <http://www.onestoptoolkit.org/downloads/DPN%20FACT%20SHEET%205-7-07.doc>.

effect of paid employment on public benefits. Additionally, homeless assistance staff might coordinate with vocational rehabilitation (VR) staff for post-employment services⁵ once the participant is working. Both the workforce development and homeless assistance systems have recognized that these linkages and improving relationships are crucial if people who have been homeless are to be served by the workforce development system in the long-term. Strategies for cooperation among workforce, homeless assistance, and mental health systems include:

- Conducting cross-systems training
- Visiting programs in other systems
- Holding inter-system discussions about integrating different service cultures and client expectations
- Integrating data collection and reporting requirements
- Educating staff about the value of leveraging other systems' services and resources

Programs following various models can benefit through linkages with the local workforce development system. For example, one of the supported employment programs has found that it has great success in placing candidates through a workforce collaborative that performs outreach to employers, identifies openings, and maintains long-term relationships with the employers.

Linkages with the workforce development system also help to place clients in a wider variety of workplaces. One program with links to the workforce development system has a policy of not placing more than two to three participants at any one job site. This limit requires staff to think creatively about placements that meet participants' needs rather than referring people to the same places over and over. Additionally, it

⁵ Under Federal regulations, State VR departments provide post-employment services to help individuals with disabilities "maintain, regain, or advance in employment"; the services are to be "limited in scope and duration." See 34 C.F.R., section 361.5 (b) (42). A specific example listed in the regulation is "The individual's employment is jeopardized because of conflicts with supervisors or co-workers, and the individual needs mental health services and counseling to maintain the employment."

helps diminish the stigma that can be created when a subgroup of employees is associated with having special needs, particularly when one member of that group has problems at work.

One employment program uses relationships with the business community to promote the idea that people with disabilities represent an important part of the workforce. Strategies for developing relationships include participating in chambers of commerce, bringing employer representatives to visit programs, and having satisfied “customers” promote their successes in hiring program participants.

However, programs involved in the workforce development system caution that funding under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA)⁶ is geared toward training and placement rather than retention. Additionally, the programs must use WIA funding for services that address the needs of all potential workers and are not designed to address more customized needs of individual job-seekers. These programs therefore use other funding sources to provide retention-related services. For example, an employment program in California uses county mental health funding to provide on-going support to participants who have psychiatric disabilities.

Work-Readiness Approaches

Programs following the traditional work-readiness model rely on extensive pre-employment training and education as well as personal preparation to address emotional and logistical issues that might impact future employment before a participant is expected to begin working. Pre-employment activities might include adult education or GED classes, training or credentialing for specific jobs, and training in “soft skills” that allow individuals to succeed in the workplace, such as a elements of a strong work ethic, an ability to work in teams, self-discipline, self-confidence, punctuality, and courtesy. There is also a strong emphasis on addressing personal issues such as substance abuse, trauma caused by homelessness, and other emotional stresses that have impacted employability in the past. It should be noted that these issues are addressed in the other models as well, but the

primary emphasis may be on dealing with them during, rather than prior to, placement in employment.

Programs following the work-readiness model can address retention issues by finding ways to ensure that transitional jobs become permanent. Traditionally, many programs have initially placed clients in non-competitive, “sheltered workshops” in which expectations are lower than they would be in most jobs, in order to allow the person to develop confidence and some job skills. Unfortunately, many participants fail to make the transition to competitive jobs that place higher expectations on workers.

Some programs try to make initial placements in jobs with better pay and benefits in order to improve job satisfaction. Providing specified training, such as computer classes or welding certification, can help participants get jobs with better long-term potential.

Social Enterprises

Social enterprises are income-generating ventures that have as an underlying goal to help the people working there. The managers of such programs will commonly refer to a “double bottom-line,” meaning the need to make money and the need to help participants. The best-known examples are thrift shops, restaurants, lawn care, and maintenance services that employ currently and formerly homeless people, people with disabilities, veterans, runaway youth, or other groups who might need social services and employment assistance. The social enterprise raises revenue that is used to pay its workers and support employment-related services. This revenue is often supplemented with revenue from private grants or public sources.

It might seem odd to discuss retention in the context of social enterprises, as many view them as a transitional work experience. However, social enterprises can promote workforce attachment and are often able to move individuals into ongoing employment in similar businesses in the community. Many social enterprises also have permanent jobs within the enterprise in order to ensure the stability of overall production or customer service, and thus these jobs can be filled by graduates of social enterprises as well.

Social enterprises that function as day labor or temporary agencies offering temporary staffing to local businesses often find that participants can find work directly with those businesses. A social

⁶ WIA provides funding for One-Stop Career Centers. The Department of Labor (DOL) website includes a “plain English” version of WIA at <http://www.doleta.gov/usworkforce/wia/Runningtext2.htm>.

enterprise that networks within its industry sector often sees its employees make lateral moves within the industry.

One significant advantage of the social enterprise is the ability and expectation for the supervisor to provide active support, guidance, and constructive critique as needed to the participants. This relationship gives useful information directly to the participant, and also allows the participant to learn how to act comfortably and appropriately with a supervisor in a setting where asking questions, making mistakes, trying different job positions, and training each other is the norm.

GOOD PLACEMENT = GOOD RETENTION

One of the factors that will determine whether a person is likely to maintain employment or use a job as a stepping stone to other employment is the quality and appropriateness of job placements. If the employment service provider can assist a participant in finding a job that meets his or her interests, strengths, and needs, there is a greater chance of success. An earlier lecture in this series covers assessment in some detail, but we will review how assessment is linked to employment retention.

Dream Jobs and Stepping Stones

Of course, the “perfect job” for a person is rarely available, and an employment provider might end up placing a participant into several jobs before a suitable match is made. Many of the opportunities available to people who have been homeless are low-paying, tedious jobs, particularly when the participant has other obstacles such as lack of education or work experience or a criminal record. Other times, a job might sound promising, but the participant might discover that the job is much different from its appearance on paper.

Discussing a participant’s “dream job” can be helpful, even if that job is a long way off. In one program, staff makes distinctions among a person’s dream job; “survival jobs,” which simply help pay bills; and jobs that are stepping stones toward the dream job. While sometimes people must take survival jobs simply to get by, the program tries to link people to jobs that might have at least some relation to the dream job. For example, one client had the dream job of being a doctor, yet had a skill set that was more matched with custodial work. Program staff helped her locate custodial work in a hospital setting so that she could learn about how the hospital worked, pick up medical lingo, and

learn about various jobs in the medical profession to which she might aspire.

In the pre-employment stage, identifying a person’s dream job can also provide an opportunity for informational interviewing in the participant’s field of interest. Another participant in the same program had an interest in being a nurse, and program staff arranged for her to meet with the human resources director of a hospital. The HR director told the participant about the education that is needed for various nursing jobs, as well as the types of positions for which demand was the greatest. In discovering a person’s dream job, even if it seems unrealistic or remote, staff can help place someone in a job that the participant views as having importance to his or her long-term goals.

At one program, the assessment process includes the participant working with a staff member to develop a “life map” explaining how the person got to where he or she is today. This helps to create a bond between the participant and the staff and is useful in planning how the participant will present himself or herself.

Of course, sometimes people who have been homeless (like many job seekers) have no idea what their long-term career goals are, and on top of that, might not be ready to start thinking about long-term goals. They might find that working in a low-pressure situation might allow them to get on their feet and get used to working before they have to make any kind of decisions.

Some programs rely upon paid internships. Placements are based on the interests that that participants have expressed, as well as qualifications and other factors, such as criminal records, that might affect their ability to work in certain industries or positions. The internship gives them a reference for future employment and helps them get used to a work routine. One program director estimated that 20 to 25 percent of internships turn into permanent employment.

In each situation mentioned above, there is an inherent focus on “planning for retention,” and working with a participant to think about how any job will require specific actions and attitudes in order to stay employed. Additionally, this act of “planning for retention” can serve as an invaluable tool to the participant to anticipate the challenges that might arise in each job that is obtained.

Motivational Interviewing during Placement

Using motivational interviewing techniques, which are firmly established clinical practices, can help to determine a participant's interests, as well as prepare the participant for some of the challenges of the job search and beginning employment. These techniques emphasize the positive attributes that any individual has and focus on building and increasing motivation to move forward based on the discovery of personal strengths. The overall goal should be to help the participant identify challenges and build motivation to overcome those challenges. The following are examples of motivational interviewing techniques at the placement stage:

- Ask questions that probe barriers that the person has faced at work or might face in future work, thus helping the participant to identify the need to address these challenges.
- Use examples of what the participant does to survive on the streets or in the shelter to help identify potential work skills, such as time management.
- Build on personal successes of the participant in overcoming challenges and barriers to emphasize how the same thing can be done with successful employment.
- When discussing barriers, offer problem-solving techniques and discussing how they might be used in an employment setting.
- Work on building trust so that the participant is able to honestly convey barriers and will be more enthusiastic about reporting successes.

IDENTIFY AND ANTICIPATE CHALLENGES

Most people who have been homeless face one or more challenges that might make retention an issue. Mental health or substance abuse problems are obvious challenges that require attention in order to ensure that they do not influence work behavior or affect work performance. However, other issues in a person's life are also likely to have a great impact on his or her ability to hold a job or keep working over a period of time.

When identifying barriers that may potentially impact job retention, it is useful to think about these in terms of logistical barriers and personal barriers.

Logistical Barriers

Like many people with low incomes, participants must successfully balance numerous logistical issues in order to maintain employment. For example, the availability of child care remains a major concern for many participants who have children, particularly for those who are working non-traditional hours such as overnight or weekend shifts. Finding out about childcare responsibilities and those in a person's life who can assist with child care is crucial to ensuring long-term success, because an unreliable child care situation can lead to tardiness or missed work. As part of planning for retention, it is also wise to explore public childcare resources as early in the job search process as possible and assist participants in getting on available waiting lists.

Transportation might also present challenges to a participant who does not own a reliable vehicle, cannot afford gasoline, or is unfamiliar with public transportation. Identifying employment sites that the participant can get to and making sure that he or she is comfortable with getting there are crucial to success on the job. As part of the "planning for retention" process, it is important to support the participant to identify how transportation needs will be met on a daily basis. Assistance might include identifying routes of public transportation, purchasing passes for public transportation after a certain pay period of each month, or being aware of affordable parking options if one is driving to work.

Medical issues often impact job retention because the experience of homelessness is physically, emotionally, and mentally straining. Significant health issues can arise for individuals who have experienced homelessness, and these might appear quickly or in greater severity than is expected. Active medical issues as well as the onset of new ones during employment can present enormous challenges in ongoing job retention. These issues may present logistical challenges such as scheduling ongoing treatment and doctors' appointments, transportation to medical facilities, and extra expenses incurred through treatment that impact overall economic stability of the participant. It is crucial that "planning for retention" activities include anticipating certain health issues if they are potentially

indicated and discussing how this might be handled while the participant is working.

Other supports that many workers take for granted must be addressed in helping the person who has been homeless transition back into work. Examples include housing, public benefits, and legal counsel on issues such as outstanding criminal or civil matters or child support obligations.

In each of the examples discussed above, the prevailing theme is to think about the possible barriers and challenges relevant to the specific participant that might arise on a job prior to and during the job search, as well as after placement. The more discussion and planning that can occur about possible challenges that might arise, the more normal it will seem to the participant when a challenge does arise, and the possibility for being prepared to cope with and manage the situation is greater.

Personal Barriers

The very experience of homelessness might have a significant impact on the participant's behavior in the workplace. The following are some examples:

- The experience of losing housing, possessions, family, friends, etc., can cause long-term trauma.
- Being in an unfamiliar setting can create stress.
- Participants might react negatively if they feel they are being judged, scrutinized, or looked down upon.
- People who have experienced marginalization, prejudice, and oppression might have difficulty trusting supervisors or co-workers.
- Homelessness influences ideas about privacy, personal space, safety, and territory that could lead to inappropriate responses to supervisors or co-workers who are acting within expected workplace norms but in ways that are threatening to the participant.
- Escaping homelessness requires a focus on immediate personal needs, and developing a sense of teamwork and long-term planning can take time.

Additionally, work itself will affect other aspects of the participant's life. Consider, for example, whether a work schedule will allow a participant to make needed medical, mental health, or substance abuse counseling appointments or participate in activities such as 12-step meetings. Work might separate a person from family, friends, or routine activities. Additionally, while working is generally acknowledged to be helpful, excessive stress from work might influence mental health, substance abuse, or medical disorders. A plan to help the participant cope with such changes is needed to ensure that work attempts will be successful.

Some of the same barriers that make it difficult for people who have been homeless to find jobs also make it difficult for them to retain jobs once hired. Some programs find that participants who have criminal records are often hired by skeptical employers who fire them at the first suspicion of wrongdoing. It is possible that an employee with a criminal record would be the first person suspected if, for example, money or property was found to be missing. It has been the experience of some programs that people who have criminal histories often have anger management issues that must be addressed. Some programs have observed that participants in recovery from addiction are not used to answering to authority and might react negatively to supervisors. Discovering and planning for personal traits is crucial.

Coordinating Services

Employment programs differ on the amount of contact that employment staff has with others involved in providing services to a participant, such as housing staff, case managers, and substance abuse counselors. For example, at one supported employment program, the employment staff works closely with mental health counselors, substance abuse counselors, and others who provide services to participants, in order to ensure that everyone working with the participant is aware of the client's work goals and knows what they can do to support these goals.

In many cases, it will be the mental health counselor who is helping the participant deal with problems encountered at work, and some programs have had experiences in which mental health counselors gave negative messages about work to participants, such as saying that the stress of work would worsen symptoms of mental illnesses. Employment staff has worked hard to convey messages about

participants' positive work experiences and ensure that mental health counselors support work goals. The key to this coordination is for the entire support team to have a unified approach to employment goals so that the individual has the best chance of success and also has all the supports necessary to succeed.

With a participant's permission, employment staff can work with other individuals and organizations involved in the participant's life, such as family, friends, places of worship, or probation officers, so that these entities can provide extra "eyes and ears" as well as support for issues that might be affecting a person's job performance.

When different entities provide different services, coordination can be difficult. The tool "Services Tracking for Individual Participants" is included in the retention guidebook, *Keeping up the Good Work*,ⁱⁱ and is useful for tracking which entity is providing various services in support of a participant's work goals to ensure that needs are being met.

ADJUSTMENT TO WORKING LIFE

For people who have been homeless and unemployed, returning to work represents not only an adjustment to new responsibilities, but to an entirely different culture. A main component of retention services is helping people adjust to life on the job. In preparing participants for placement, some programs invite employers to visit the program and talk to jobseekers about what the employer (and employers generally) are looking for in an employee.

On an ongoing basis, staff is likely to hear about some of the "bumps" in the adjustment process. While the role of employment staff is generally to be supportive, some participants might have an unrealistic perception of the value and demands of work. Helping participants get used to individual workplaces and providing some basic guidance in problem-solving and teamwork can aid in retention.

Workplace Culture

Each workplace has its own unique culture, and adjusting to that culture can be a challenge for new employees, even ones who have worked at similar jobs. For the formerly homeless employee, by contrast, the adjustment from living on the streets or in shelters to performing professionally in the workplace represents a radical

change. In helping participants adjust to their new jobs, it is important to prepare them to gather information through their own observations. The participant starting a new job should be aware of the following:

- Adhering to workplace etiquette, including how to refer to co-workers and supervisors and the type of language and voice level to be used
- Complying with a structured schedule, including how punctual one is expected to be and whether overtime or waiting until a replacement arrives is expected
- Gauging "unwritten rules," such as how often people take breaks, make personal phone calls, or converse with co-workers and how employees spend their "down time"
- Understanding how the team or co-workers interact with each other as well as supervisors and how co-workers assist each other or work independently
- Identifying how much personal information should be revealed or discussed at the workplace, and when this should occur
- Respecting workplace boundaries and understanding that personal items are respected in shared places, for example a desk in a shared office or a lunch bag in a shared refrigerator
- Learning to survive office politics and avoiding workplace gossipⁱⁱⁱ

Problem-solving

One program director uses the term "job maturity" to describe a set of skills that many people do not have when they come into the program or even after they start their first jobs. People might have unrealistic expectations of how they should be treated, or might be overly sensitive or even suspicious of supervisors. He gave the example of one young man who called in sick for several days and, soon after returning to work, became ill again. Fearing that his supervisor would not believe he was sick again, he quit instead of asking for time off. His program encourages people to call the employment staff whenever they feel they are going to quit or be fired or if they are having interpersonal problems, and staff can typically mediate some sort of resolution.

One program provides each participant with a card to carry with them that offers them practical advice on what to do in times of job troubles. The card was developed in response to a perception that many participants have unrealistic expectations of work and quit too easily.

Some participants need common sense training on how to communicate with supervisors. Examples might include asking a supervisor for more challenging duties rather than saying that the work is boring or finding the right words to convey difficulties getting along with certain co-workers.

Problem-solving skills can benefit the participant both in workplace relationships and in performance of job duties. Teaching problem-solving skills to the formerly homeless person can therefore improve the prospects for retention. Simple strategies such as the following can be taught:

- Breaking down problems into smaller, more manageable pieces and examining them individually
- Identifying possible action steps and desired outcomes for each of the pieces
- Identifying time frames and resources needed to achieve desired outcomes
- Identifying sources of help for taking needed actions
- Setting goals for achieving outcomes
- Setting timelines for achieving goals^{iv}

In helping to maintain or restore relationships with co-workers or supervisors, additional problem-solving skills, such as the following, are helpful:

- Asking for clarification when the participant does not understand something, rather than making assumptions
- Using “I” statements to convey one’s own feelings rather than accusing someone of doing something, for example, “I felt insulted when you said what you said”
- Asking to speak to someone privately rather than in front of co-workers^v

Teamwork

For the formerly homeless job participant, whose survival might have depended on protection of his or her own interests, instilling ideas of teamwork might present a particular challenge. The following techniques might be helpful:

- Ensure that the participant views teamwork as an important part of job satisfaction.
- Help the participant understand how teamwork improves productivity and can therefore lead to better performance assessments.
- Point out that co-workers form a natural support network that can help when dealing with workplace stress and that teamwork on the job builds relationships with co-workers.
- Identify specific ways that the participant can learn new skills and insights from other team members.
- Explain that teamwork involves not only offering assistance but asking for it when it is needed.
- Discourage negative comments to co-workers or talking about them behind their backs.
- Teach the participant to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of co-workers and consider that information when help is requested or offered.
- Encourage the participant to engage in self-advocacy, but not at the expense of other co-workers.
- Remind the participant to share information and request information that helps everyone do their jobs.
- Help the participant view their performance at work in the context of their co-workers’ performance.^{vi}

HANDLING PROBLEMS AT WORK

Even with careful preparation, participants frequently require assistance with problems that arise at work. One program helps participants deal with problems they encounter at work by hosting a “job success club” for people who are already working (in addition to

the program's job club for those who are looking for work). The job success club is led by a licensed counselor, and people can work on job retention skills such as talking to a supervisor, evaluating one's own job skills, and understanding employer feedback.

Often, when a participant is experiencing interpersonal problems at work, staff can role-play scenarios acting as the employer or co-worker, to help the participant see the other perspective. Devising various scenarios might also help the staff identify the types of situations that trigger problems for the participant.⁷ This approach is also useful in cases where a participant quits or is terminated from a job, so that the experience can serve as a "learning experience."

The approach to handling problems at work depends largely on whether the participant has disclosed participation in the program to his or her employer. If the participant has made this disclosure, program staff might talk with the employer about some of the problems that the participant is having, help the employer to get a better understanding of the issues that the participant has faced or is facing, and reach out to the employer as a resource for helping to resolve problems. If the participant has chosen not to self-disclose, an employment specialist will work one-on-one with the participant to resolve issues, while a case manager might help to resolve non-work issues such as housing or mental health issues that are affecting work performance.

Addressing Relapse

Relapse to drug and alcohol use is a commonly anticipated problem, particularly when people receive their first paychecks. The sudden influx of money creates for some people the temptation to spend it on drugs or alcohol. The key to success is identifying a relapse or potential relapse as soon as possible.

An ongoing relationship between program and participant, such as that found in supported employment, can help prevent relapse from resulting in job loss. It is also very useful to work with those participants who have specific substance abuse and mental health histories to "plan for relapse" and anticipate steps that will be taken

⁷ The *Supported Employment KIT* (Center for Mental Health Services, n.d.) provides illustrative examples.

and supports that will be accessed if relapse is imminent or does actually occur. By planning for the possibility, the participant will be more prepared to overcome and face the challenge rather than feeling compelled to flee, quit the job, or act impulsively in some other way.

Planning for Relapse

Stressful experiences at work can often trigger old memories, feelings, issues of trauma, or the sense that a situation is unmanageable. Planning for this possibility and talking about viable solutions in advance gives the participant new tools to use when these situations arise.

Many programs spend time in the assessment and placement phases talking about triggers and signs of impending relapses, teaching participants to recognize the signs of a relapse and what to do, both from an employment standpoint and a treatment standpoint. Many programs try to develop relationships with family, friends, clergy, or others close to participants who might be aware of signs that a relapse might be near.

Responding to Relapse

While employers must maintain a drug- and alcohol-free workplace for everyone's safety, employment programs can help to ensure that someone who does relapse can resume the recovery process and return to work. An employment specialist can negotiate a period of leave for the employee so that he or she can get needed treatment or support. Employers are more responsive to giving a person a leave of absence to deal with addiction issues than they are to employees who are drunk or high at work, leaving them little alternative to termination. Some programs try to educate employers about the recovery process and stress that relapses are often part of the process and do not preclude returning to abstinence.

In addition to an opportunity for treatment, relapses also present an occasion for the employment specialist to talk with the participant about the relationship between the job and the relapse, helping to turn it into a learning experience. The employment specialist can use motivational interviewing techniques to determine whether the participant wants to return to work, to help the participant identify causes of the relapse, and to offer alternative courses of action if the participant is facing triggers.^{vii} However, as one program director put it,

“A job doesn’t cause relapse, a person’s addiction does,” and therefore it is important for employment specialists to work in cooperation with a person’s treatment team.

Strategies for Working with Employers

Due to the frequency with which issues of relapse or other barriers to employment come up, employment programs helping people who have been homeless typically take a proactive approach to educating employers about the issues facing participants.

Develop Relationships with Employers

Some programs offer to function as an external human resources department for participants to help the employer deal with issues at work that could be related to the participant’s housing situation or special needs such as mental health or substance abuse treatment. However, it has been the experience of programs that employers, while grateful for the offer of support, generally want to treat program participants just like any other employee.

Many programs try to develop ongoing relationships with employers, allowing the employers to develop a fuller understanding of the need for employment as a means to escape homelessness, the willingness and ability of program participants to work, the types of issues that might come up for a new worker who has experienced homelessness, and ways that an employer can accommodate special needs.

Programs use a variety of techniques in order to develop relationships with employers. Some use old-fashioned “cold-calling” or “pounding the pavement” to recruit employers interested in hiring and supporting program participants. Some invite employers to weekly job clubs to give presentations about the employer, the industry, or general career advice; for example, an HR professional from a hospital might give a presentation on careers in health care. Programs can use employers to assist in developing different soft and hard skills training curricula and also act as trainers, giving employers the opportunity to have direct influence in developing the skills of future employees.

Address the Hiring of Ex-offenders

Employment services often have the greatest difficulty finding employers willing to hire ex-offenders. One program that places many ex-offenders is aware of employers’ hesitation to hire their participants.

They therefore have recruited employers who have had success in hiring program participants to provide testimonials to other employers and address specific concerns. It is also useful to put together an advisory group of local employers to give guidance to staff and participants about how to address retention issues and also meet the business demands and needs of the employers.

Help Employers Meet Participant Needs

Often, once hired, program participants will need some form of accommodation in order to perform the job. As noted, many programs find that staff frequently requests time off for participants who have relapsed. However, many employers are unsure of what types of accommodations might be needed either under laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or simply as a way of supporting employees and reducing turnover. Program staff can play a role in helping employers understand the needs of program participants, either through ongoing discussion or using tools such as the series of fact sheets (see the Resources section) produced by the Job Accommodation Network at West Virginia University.

FOLLOW-ALONG SERVICES

For most employment programs, providing retention-related services on a long-term basis is challenging because the programs rely on funding sources focused mostly on placement. Many employment programs operating on limited funding find that they have a difficult time conducting follow-up with participants after they have been placed in a job; in some cases, they might conduct only 30-day, 60-day, and 90-day telephone follow-up. For participants who have significant barriers to employment, however, additional follow-up can have many benefits.

Some programs have found alternative sources of funding for working with clients for an extended period of time after placement:

- One program has received private foundation funding that has supported the hiring of a staff member who can concentrate on helping program alumni change jobs or advance in their careers.
- Another program uses State funding for placement-related services and county funding for follow-along services because

the State seeks to close cases within 60 to 90 days of placement. Using county funding, the program can maintain contact with participants indefinitely, typically trying to make two contacts per month with the participant and an additional contact with the employer or a service provider, friend, or family member close to the participant.

- Another program has been successful in using VR funds and a partnership with a local mental health provider to support ongoing job retention services.

These practices involve leveraging valuable resources from other systems and encourage the integration of job retention, workforce attachment, and career advancement into a participant's overall treatment plan.

When providing follow-along services, programs typically schedule routine times for follow-up. Ideally, follow-up should occur frequently in the participant's first few weeks of work, with decreasing frequency as the participant establishes a work routine, and remaining available when crises arise. As an incentive for participants to meet with staff, some programs give items donated to the program (such as gift cards) during follow-up meetings. Additionally, some of the programs interviewed are gaining access to affordable housing options, and thus participants who are obtaining and retaining employment may also have greater access to permanent housing.

Motivational Interviewing to Assess Job Performance

Just as motivational interviewing is useful during initial placement, these techniques can help to gather information about the participant's progress in the workplace and help the participant to develop skills that will be useful in maintaining employment. By using open-ended questions, staff can gather information about the following:

- The participant's job duties
- The participant's assessment of how well he or she is fulfilling those duties
- Whether these duties are meeting the participant's interests
- What new skills and interests the participant might be acquiring

- How the job is increasing or decreasing the participant's overall motivation to continue working
- How the participant's transportation and child care situations are influencing work performance
- Whether working is increasing or reducing stress
- Whether the work schedule or experiences at work are affecting the participant's personal or family relationships
- How the participant is balancing work and other duties, such as school and treatment, or activities such as free time, hobbies, or worship
- If the participant feels that life is moving in a positive direction

In addition to initial assessment of a participant's skills, interests, and barriers, ongoing assessments can be very helpful in promoting employment retention. The tool, "Performance and Skill Tracking," in *Keeping up the Good Work*, is intended to help employment staff evaluate a participant's employment skills over time.

Formal vs. Informal Follow-up

Some programs provide both informal and formal follow-up. For example, one program receives funding for case managers and employment specialists to provide formal follow-along services for one year to 55 participants. Case managers and employment specialists have regular contact, including home visits if needed. Typical services include the following:

- Linking with mental health treatment
- Finding support groups
- Working with employers on a participant's issues such as schedules and work behavior
- Assisting with housing searches
- Helping set up a household and teaching participants to take care of the home
- Assisting with moving from one job to another when needed

- Helping people advance with employers by providing additional training or helping with interviewing or resumes

Participants who do not choose to participate or for whom space is unavailable still have access to informal follow-up. They can call their case manager or the program director at any time, and they also can participate in monthly structured meetings, including meetings led by a licensed therapist.

One program offers a “job success club” for those already working, and at meetings, the program offers participants transit tokens that help them get to and from work, as an incentive for attending the meetings. The facilitator and “alumni” can provide advice and support on issues such as identifying stress or depression, finding happiness at work, becoming a more effective employee, and budgeting employment income.

Another program holds quarterly fun events for alumni, including a holiday party and a summer barbeque at a retreat center. While these events are not focused on employment or providing services, they allow staff to find out how alumni are doing, facilitate the development of supportive peer relationships among alumni, and help make alumni aware that they can return for services if their job or housing situation changes.

BEYOND THE FIRST JOB

Working for a single company throughout one’s career, while common a few decades ago, is extremely unusual today. Changing jobs often is considered the norm, and therefore a discussion about job retention should acknowledge that participants are likely to leave jobs for valid reasons, and that some moves must be viewed as successes in the context of job retention. While keeping a participant in a single job long-term is not always a desired outcome, one goal for the program is workforce attachment, or helping participants become regular members of the workforce who view work as essential in their lives and who look for a new job if a current job is lost or not going well. An even more important goal is career advancement, or helping participants achieve better pay, benefits, and job satisfaction through internal promotion, additional training or education, or changing jobs.

Changing jobs or pursuing promotions can require certain qualifications and requires a person to be organized. The “Planning for

Career Attachment and Advancement” tool in *Keeping up the Good Work* can be used to prepare participants for future job-seeking or internal advancement.

Workforce Attachment

One reason to think about workforce attachment—keeping some form of employment over long periods of time—rather than retention in a single job is that many adults who have experienced homelessness have had a great deal of transition in their lives, and it might seem more familiar and “normal” to move between jobs than to stay at a job long-term. Additionally, many younger people tend to be “job-hoppers,” and programs have observed that this generalization extends to younger people who have been homeless.

Role of the Employment Specialist

In supported employment, the ongoing relationship with the employment specialist can help the participant stay in the workforce, even when the first job—or the first few jobs—do not work out. Even before placement, the employment specialist can ensure that the participant is learning how to search for and apply for jobs, so that he or she can do this independently later. Often, the employment specialist simply lends a supportive ear to someone who is experiencing job frustration and offers them support while trying to encourage a constructive response. This role is particularly important to participants who have not had positive work role models in their lives.

Another role for the employment specialist is to help the participant leave a job on the best terms possible—for example, by providing notice, by simply discussing the desire for other opportunities, and by asking for a reference. The employment specialist can also help the participant use the job as a learning experience, identifying what worked and what did not work about the previous position and using that information to identify new interests and needs. Staff can use each work experience, including specific elements such as the physical location and layout, the type of supervision that is offered, the schedule, and the general menu of responsibilities, as topics of discussion and reference when searching for the next employment situation.

Involving Program Alumni

Program “alumni” (i.e., those who are working successfully and who might no longer actively using the program’s services) are an excellent resource for teaching participants about the value of working as well as the wisdom of remaining employed rather than quitting or leaving jobs dramatically or with little notice. Programs use various methods to encourage alumni contact with current participants, including the following:

- Inviting alumni to speak to current participants
- Holding regular meetings among alumni and current participants
- Placing participants in internships working alongside (or under the supervision of) alumni
- Hiring companies employing (or owned by) alumni for catering or other services
- Arranging for alumni to formally mentor current participants who are newly hired

Career Advancement

As noted, many programs are limited in the length of time over which follow-up activities can be conducted. However, those programs that can have extended contact with participants can help participants focus on furthering or changing careers, leading to better job satisfaction, higher pay, and better benefits.

In supported employment, the employment specialist can help the participant advance in his or her career. The employment specialist can help the participant identify specific training, education, or certification that is needed for advancement and help the participant pursue the additional qualifications. The employment specialist can also help with self-representation skills, such as approaching the employer, interviewing for a position, and pulling together a “portfolio” of work or describing accomplishments in the present position.

One program has a career center for alumni, complete with computers for job searches. Staff assists alumni in writing letters, refining resumes, preparing for interviews, and other steps needed for getting a promotion or moving to a new job. The center also provides access to

educational opportunities and material support such as clothing for interviews.

When considering career advancement services as part of overall job retention support, it is important to work with the participant to envision a career direction that is desirable. This includes anticipating challenges that will arise, developing tools and techniques to use as these challenges occur, and performing self-assessment along the way as one’s personal living situation, relationships, responsibilities, financial obligations, interests, and skills change. Career advancement activities are ongoing, and thus it is important to plan, document the different actions defined during certain times, and use these in order to adapt to external opportunities. The “Workforce Attachment and Career Advancement Planning Tool” in *Keeping up the Good Work* can be useful in storing and tracking this information.

CONCLUSION

For programs serving people who have experienced homelessness, placing people into jobs might seem challenging enough, and thinking about retention might seem particularly daunting. Many programs are funded to work on placement and, at most, short-term follow-up. However, programs following diverse employment models such as supported employment, customized employment, work-readiness, linking to the workforce development system, and social enterprises have found strategies to focus on retention.

Even in programs funded only to work with people up until placement, staff can address retention by thinking about the long-term potential of job placements, and by “planning for retention” (i.e., preparing participants to deal with anticipated obstacles and give them strategies for staying in the workforce). Programs with limited funding for follow-up might conduct a variety of informal activities such as phone calls, social events, or alumni meetings.

Some programs have leveraged funding from other sources to conduct more formal follow-along activities. Depending on the program model, these supports might include job coaching, help with requesting time off or other reasonable accommodations, and helping to mediate situations that arise in the workplace.

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