



Employment Services for People Who Have Disabilities

When developing employment services, supportive housing providers must address issues related to disabilities and special needs. This section discusses additional information and specific considerations for working with people with histories of mental illness, HIV/AIDS, and substance use, and it also includes a brief discussion about homelessness, which is a circumstance experienced by many individuals who enter supportive housing.

Policy Issues

Broad access to jobs for people with disabilities remains limited, and most people with disabilities are not employed. Organizations that are involved with people who have mental illnesses, for instance, are usually well aware of the dramatic differences between the number of people who want to work and the number that do. Many people with mental illness want to work but do not due to stigma, lack of encouragement, lack of training, fear of losing benefits, and a pervasive attitude that disabilities and employment are incompatible. In recent years, people with disabilities have been more assertive in expressing their interest in employment.

In response, more organizations that provide supportive services to these populations have developed programs that facilitate the entry of individuals with disabilities into the workplace. Though much of this programming in supportive housing is relatively new, the results have been very encouraging. To be educated about mental illness or AIDS is to understand that people with disabilities can be very productive employees given reasonable accommodations for their illnesses.

One of the most significant barriers to employment for people with disabilities is that society lags so far behind what is possible. Consider, for example, the improvement that wheelchair-accessible sidewalks provide. Prior to this modest change in curbsides, it was not that people in wheelchairs were not capable of moving around safely and independently but rather that the lack of accommodation prevented it. Unfortunately, equivalent changes have yet to occur in the workplace, and greater levels of systems changes still need to occur.

Program Issues

Many supportive housing programs serve people with a range of special needs and disabilities. The specific issues regarding employment vary with particular needs and disabilities and the impact on individual functioning. There are wide variations in the abilities, aptitudes, and skills of people who have disabilities.

An initial step in making a match to a job or employment area is an assessment of how a disability impacts the person's ability to work. Some disabilities may so profoundly affect an individual's functioning that employment options are extremely limited or the level of support required to

Note: This document is included within the *Supportive Services* section of CSH's *Toolkit for Developing and Operating Supportive Housing*, which is available at www.csh.org/toolkit2. This document has been adapted from CSH's publication *Developing the "Support" in Supportive Housing*, which is available at www.csh.org/publications.

maintain a job is impractical. Employment program goals should be based on what is reasonable to achieve. Providers must ensure that they have adequate resources and staff to support tenants in meeting their goals and the program in achieving its targets.

Being able to offer flexible programming and access to a broad range of jobs including transitional, supported, part-time, and full-time work are preferable. All programs serving people with disabilities will need to develop structures to conduct specialized assessments, address issues of self-disclosure and accommodation under the ADA, and prepare applicants to discuss intermittent or limited work histories during job search efforts. The ADA prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of physical and mental disabilities and requires employers to make reasonable accommodations to enable qualified disabled people to fill available positions. Reasonable accommodations range from specialized communications and computer equipment to adjustments in work hours or assignments. If a participant does require accommodation in the workplace for a disability, he/she will need to inform the employer and may do so during the interview process or after starting work.

Program participants and staff should be educated about the ADA and its applications. In cases where accommodation under the ADA is not sought, the decision to disclose a non-visible condition or disability to an employer or colleagues is one that must be weighed carefully. It is ultimately the tenant's choice (except in cases where job sites have agreed to dedicate slots for specific populations), but staff should help the individual assess the pros and cons of disclosure and, if needed, plan how to discuss the issue. For many people, disclosure will occur once relationships with coworkers have developed and there has been some degree of success in the job.

Almost all employment program participants will benefit from practice interviews or role-playing before actually applying for a job. Additionally, addressing gaps in work history will usually be required during the interview process, and it helps to rehearse this discussion in advance.

Mental Illness

There is a broad spectrum of mental illnesses, and a mental illness can impact functioning in a variety of ways: cognitively, emotionally, interpersonally, and behaviorally. (See [Link to Mental Health Services](#) for more on this subject.) During career planning, it is important to understand an individual's ability to:

- Learn and retain information
- Plan and prioritize tasks
- Follow directions
- Respond to authority
- Communicate
- Manage stimulation
- Process information
- Make decisions

- Resolve conflicts
- Manage stress

If possible, it is often helpful to use in-house and supported job opportunities to gain a thorough understanding of skills, abilities, and problem areas. Individuals may act differently in a job environment, and the therapeutic benefits of work can, in many cases, reduce symptoms and improve functioning. The nature of chronic mental illness and the way in which it has been addressed in society have robbed many individuals of the formative years of their education and work life. A middle-aged person with mental illness may find him/herself competing for job opportunities that are very different from the career dreams he/she had before becoming ill. This loss should be addressed. Individuals often need to develop new employment paths and have opportunities to rebuild confidence and self-esteem. For some people with serious mental illness, full-time employment may not be an option, and the employment program should have access to other opportunities for work and meaningful activity.

What is true for all employment programs participants is emphasized even more for participants with mental illness: a one-size-fits-all approach to employment services does not always work. Specifically, programs can be particularly helpful by:

- Assisting tenants to advance toward individualized goals
- Understanding specifically how features of a mental illness affect job choices and performance
- Helping to make the best choices each step of the way
- Offering transitional and supported work opportunities
- Preparing for possible setbacks
- Providing assistance to ensure income stability and continued health insurance

HIV/AIDS

Individuals with HIV run the gamut from those who have had extensive work histories and successful careers to people with very limited or no work experience. Due to improvements in medications and treatment, people with HIV disease are living longer, healthier lives and are often able to remain in their jobs or return to the workforce. However, changes in overall health status and the need to manage complex medication regimens on the job often require that the appropriate type of work for an individual be reassessed. Additionally, the drugs used to treat HIV can cause side effects such as nausea, vomiting, and severe exhaustion, making it difficult for some people to work regularly or at all. An increasing percentage of people with HIV disease also have substance use problems, and these issues can complicate the process of finding and keeping a job.

During career planning, it is important to obtain an accurate and detailed work history and information about current health status and prescribed treatments. Given the diversity of work experience among people with HIV/AIDS, a range of work options including part-time employment is important. Additionally, there are still considerable stigmas and fear associated with HIV and AIDS, and careful thought should be given to the issue of self-disclosure. However, many

people with HIV disease will be eligible for and require accommodation under the ADA. Similar to people with mental illness, continued health coverage is crucial.

Alcohol and Substance Use

Alcohol and substance use are relatively common barriers to employment among supportive housing tenants. It is also a common problem in the general workforce. Alcohol and substance use result in various costs in the workplace including decreased productivity, poor performance, absenteeism, and lateness. In some industries, employers conduct drug testing to try and ensure a drug-free workplace, although most do not. Nonetheless, repeated work problems due to substance use frequently result in termination.

Staff should understand how an individual's substance use affects or is affected by employment. Staff should raise awareness of the consequences of substance use on a person's ability to work and be mindful that work can be effective in helping people reduce substance use and avoid relapse.

It is helpful to focus on the behaviors associated with substance use that create obstacles to employment and then work to reduce these problems. It is important to remember that the general workforce includes many people who use or are addicted to alcohol and/or other substances. Obviously, many have learned to manage their use (albeit some better than others) and stay employed. Clearly, not all programs can accept this approach since it addresses only the symptoms and not the addiction. (See Link to Alcohol and Substance Abuse Services Section for more on this subject.)

Homelessness

Homelessness is not a disability, but it is an experience that affects the lives of many people who live in supportive housing. Understanding how an individual came to be homeless and the impact of homelessness on his/her life is important in providing employment support services.

For many people, being homeless was directly linked to work and the economy. The loss of a job, the inability to maintain a job, and a lack of available jobs that pay a living wage are often the reasons why people become homeless. Additionally, once housed, stable work can prevent a return to homelessness. Assistance in helping formerly homeless individuals access work opportunities is a feature of some of the most successful supportive housing projects.

Formerly homeless individuals have a broad range of skill levels, a diversity of vocational interests, and wide variations in education and work histories. They may also have limited education and job skills and intermittent, problematic, or limited work histories. In this regard, a thorough vocational assessment is often very important. Once again, in-house transitional employment positions can be helpful for gaining an understanding of an individual's strengths and weaknesses. Temporary jobs and transitional employment are also low-pressure ways to re-enter the work world.

Note: CSH's *Toolkit for Developing and Operating Supportive Housing* includes additional information regarding employment services under *Preparing for Tenants' Service Needs* in the *Supportive Services* section of the *Toolkit*, available at www.csh.org/toolkit2services.