



## Employment Services in Supportive Housing

### Overview

Work has obvious value in promoting housing stability and improving the quality of tenants' lives. Additionally, the significant changes in eligibility requirements for public benefits instituted in the late 1990s have prompted supportive housing programs to give particular focus to the vocational and employment needs of tenants.

All supportive services programs will likely offer some kind of employment assistance. These services may include linkages to GED programs, help with resume writing, and access to a computer, telephone, and fax line. The size and scope of employment programs vary depending upon the number of people to be served and the program goals. What a program can actually accomplish will also depend upon the amount and type of resources that are available. This document focuses on the major areas to be considered in developing an employment program and the individual elements necessary to create effective programs that result in jobs and career advancement.

### Defining Goals and Expectations

Before embarking on the provision of employment services, providers should carefully consider what they hope to achieve, how they will define success for themselves and for the tenants, and what level of participation or compliance will be required of the tenants.

Since employment programs are commonly evaluated on the number of people who achieve and retain gainful employment, the expectations of program participants, direct service staff, and program managers/administrators should be clear and based on the belief that people can and will succeed at work. A lack of such expectations can lead to confusion and frustration and will ultimately undermine the effectiveness of employment programming.

Depending on the needs of program participants, the length of time required to achieve employment goals can vary greatly. Program goals should be achievable, realistic, and appropriate for program participants. Structuring the program so as to develop skills, confidence, and progress toward career plans helps build staff and tenant motivation. Although effective employment programs result in people getting and keeping decent jobs, full-time employment may not be a desired or practical goal for everyone who participates. In designing the employment program, it is critical to identify jobs that tenants will want and be able to do.

Individual employment paths usually consist of a series of outcomes that can be used to monitor progress, including:

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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](http://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](http://www.csh.org/publications).

- Working part-time
- Increasing hourly wage or total income
- Retaining employment over a period of time
- Developing new skills

Participants must be clear from the beginning about the extent of services offered by the employment program, the possibilities and resources available, and the requirements for program participation. Upon entry into the program, an assessment should be conducted to ensure a match among needs, expectations, and program services.

The staff should have a clear understanding of their respective roles in the employment program. The goals of the program should guide staff interventions and be translated into daily tasks and activities. Staff should understand where they fit in the process of achieving program goals, and they must have the skills and knowledge to successfully carry out these roles.

### **Eligibility Criteria for Employment Programs**

The involvement of tenants in employment services usually includes an intake and assessment process. However, there are wide variations in eligibility criteria and vastly different assessment processes among supportive housing employment programs. There are also differences regarding the requirements for participants. At one end of the spectrum are organizations that require participants to be compliant with services and substance free. At the other end are organizations that believe people have a right to work and should not be prohibited from working for any reason except a lack of competency to fulfill a job's requirements. Employment programs usually require, however, that tenants holding in-house jobs remain in good standing with lease obligations, rent payment, and attendance at required employment meetings and workshops. In all cases, however, programs should have clear criteria for participation, and all applicants and participants should understand the expectations and purpose of the program.

### **Developing a Range of Employment Services**

Supportive housing can provide numerous opportunities to help tenants become employed and/or advance in their careers. Efforts can range from individualized counseling and support to creating in-house employment opportunities.

#### Vocational Support Services

Vocational support services help to increase motivation and provide the extra assistance that an individual may need to get and keep a job. Examples of vocational support services include:

- Helping to generate and sustain the motivation to become employed
- Assisting in developing a resume and completing job applications
- Helping to prepare for a job interview
- Planning how to respond to questions and issues regarding disclosure of a disability

- Offering pre- and post-employment support groups
- Developing individual career plans
- Discussing entitlements, health insurance, and rent subsidy issues
- Arranging for English as a second language classes
- Discussing attire and grooming
- Recognizing successes
- Supporting people through setbacks

Vocational supports include practical services that are provided as needed, before and after an individual enters the workforce. These services should be designed to help individuals achieve success in moving toward their employment goals and career objectives. Staff members working in the role of vocational counselors should have relationships with program participants that allow for an honest exchange about everything related to employment. When ambitious long-range goals are presented, it is often helpful to identify the steps or objectives to be accomplished. Additionally, it is useful for the counselor to try to understand the range of motivations behind an individual's career goals. Good communication between employment staff and other supportive services staff is equally important, and a coordinated team approach is generally most effective. The extra assistance and insight that a vocational counselor gives often make the difference in employment outcomes. For example, a GED program may help individuals pass a high school equivalency exam and add an important credential to a resume, but it does not help with interviewing skills.

#### Managing the Transition to Work

If an individual has never worked or has been absent from the workforce for an extended time, he/she may face significant challenges in making the transition to the role of an employee. Assistance and support in managing this transition are often needed. Many employment program participants who are in their 30s, 40s, or 50s, for example, are in the position of considering entry-level jobs. This can raise issues about self-esteem because these jobs might not match their expectations. For some individuals, doing entry-level work may be frustrating and leave them feeling undervalued. Discussions about expectations, concerns, and feelings as well as assistance in identifying achievable goals and developing a career plan are important in facilitating the transition.

#### Career Counseling

Since individual career plans can and do change as a result of experience and motivation, periodic discussions about the future and one's career path are important. Career counseling includes an assessment of interests, motivations, skills, capabilities, education, job training, and work history. Following are specific areas to assess and discuss:

- Education and work history
- Level of motivation
- Strengths and skills
- Short-term employment preferences
- Long-term career goals
- Potential obstacles, limitations, and disincentives (such as physical constraints, entitlement and benefit disincentives, history of incarceration)

The career counseling process should produce a career plan, which lists specific employment goals and tasks required to achieve them. The plan should give participants a clear starting point on the path to advancement. Additionally, plans identify education and skills needed as well as the types of support necessary to access and maintain employment. Staff should point out areas of past experience that demonstrate skills and strengths that can be transferable to the workplace, such as navigating the bureaucracies of public entitlements systems.

If applicable, it is particularly important that the career planning process also include discussions about self-disclosure of personal information, such as a psychiatric disability, to colleagues and supervisors. In some cases, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) will apply, and people should be informed about the accommodations available and the best processes for obtaining them.

The supportive housing setting allows the staff to work with tenants over time to set short- and long-term goals and address obstacles to reaching these goals. Issues of low self-esteem and lack of confidence, for example, are common. Ambitious and far-reaching aspirations are not unusual, however, and staff should be careful about unnecessarily dampening enthusiasm by imposing more constrained or “realistic” perspectives. Preferably, supportive housing enables the staff to assist tenants in evaluating various options, emphasizing the choices and preferences of the individual. Mandatory welfare-to-work programs, on the other hand, often place individuals in jobs and assignments that are available, though not necessarily preferred. Whatever the starting point, staff can help shape career plans that reflect each individual’s interests.

#### Finding and Developing Employment Opportunities

Finding employment opportunities is the responsibility of both tenants and staff. Searching the want ads and making “cold calls” are often effective, and finding a job may occur with or without assistance from the staff. Employment programs can be helpful in many different ways, and it may turn out to be the encouragement offered by staff or the concrete resources provided by the program that get an individual into the job market. Sometimes, people simply want to get a job and do not want or need ongoing vocational or career counseling. The staff can maintain job vacancy bulletin boards and can help individual tenants follow up on specific job leads and searches. Programs can offer transportation funds, a clothing allowance, or other short-term funds related to finding a job. Staff can also engage in strategic job development efforts with employers, cultivating linkages with local businesses and retail chains, and serving as a broker when timing and mutual interests align. Maintaining activity on both sides of the equation - job development and job applicants - is usually a major challenge for employment programs, and mechanisms for sustaining interest among all parties can be important to a program’s continued success. In the absence of viable job applicants or sufficient jobs, enthusiasm among employers and program participants can fade.

Some organizations create industry-specific training programs that focus on the development of labor pools for specific industries and corporations. By tapping into employment and economic trends (such as growth in the hospitality industry), for instance, enterprising organizations can create partnerships with local and national businesses, matching training to very specific employment needs. Industry-specific programs allow planning for specific types of jobs and for orientation of trainees to specific job markets.

While there are many advantages to having the interdependence of employers and job-training programs within industry-specific arrangements, these relationships can also force employment

programs and the individuals they serve into a narrow set of opportunities. Some tenants may not be interested in or eligible for industry-specific training and, therefore, will not participate in the program. Alternatively, organizations that attempt to develop hand-picked job opportunities may lose in efficiency and predictability but gain in other ways, such as higher participant satisfaction and job stability. Brokering jobs that have appeal and offer a living wage with benefits is a sophisticated and labor-intensive responsibility. Having a job developer on staff to focus on locating viable employment opportunities is clearly an advantage for building a job bank and for keeping a program current and effective. A job developer also serves to sustain connections with employers and to establish a track record of good referrals.

### Promoting Training and Employment Options

The Lakefront SRO Corporation in Chicago is a leader in the development of supportive housing and employment opportunities. Following are examples of strategies used by Lakefront.

- Providing in-house training programs in construction, maintenance, and computers
- Maintaining a comprehensive database of available jobs throughout the Chicago metropolitan area
- Developing connections to a range of part-time and full-time employment opportunities as well as to volunteer work and education and training programs

The decision to create a job developer position and other staff lines dedicated to employment has to take place in the context of other programmatic considerations, including the anticipated number of program participants, funding availability, program priorities, and the organization's structure and interests. The background and skills required for job developers and other staff members in an employment program may be very different from the requirements for positions in other programs within the organization. For example, a job developer with a background in business versus the social services may be preferred because a primary function of the role is to work with the business community.

In the final analysis, the number of people who actually obtain jobs and remain employed is the true test of employment programs. Of course, there are always factors to explain why a program might do better or worse: a heated or a cool economy, a larger or smaller number of individuals who have special needs, and unanticipated setbacks due to staffing problems or managerial and administrative obstacles. Nonetheless, tenants and funders are wary of programs that systematically train and prepare people without getting sufficient numbers of individuals into jobs. In short, outcome measures and job placements are very important, and programs must be designed to obtain results.

### Just Let Me Work!

Long-term classroom training, prolonged assessments, and other prerequisites to getting a job can discourage some people. Individuals often learn more about themselves and what additional training and skills they need and want by entering the work world. Additionally, getting paid and having the satisfaction of holding a job are often invaluable motivators for self-determination and advancement.

### Creating In-House Jobs and Transitional Employment

Many supportive housing sponsors have created in-house employment programs. Sometimes these initiatives are relatively informal and involve hiring tenants to fill part-time jobs, such as reception and front desk services, building maintenance, gardening and grounds work, and administrative

support services. Tenants are a valuable labor pool and set a good example for others by working.

Some organizations use in-house positions as transitional employment opportunities that provide a training period and a process for advancement. These programs are intended to build self-confidence and skills while allowing staff to further assess aptitude and performance. In-house transitional employment programs also allow for a “jobs first” approach that is appealing to tenants as well as job development staff who can attest to the employee’s ability to perform. Succeeding in a transitional position can restore an individual’s self-confidence and, most important, can make the difference to prospective employers who may be reluctant to hire individuals who have a spotty work history.

The amount of time participants will need in transitional employment varies. Though neat on the surface, strict time limits for in-house positions can prove to be problematic all around. A suitable job outside the sponsoring organization may not be available or the individual may not be ready when the time limit is reached. Therefore, flexibility in transitional positions is often preferred, even though this more open-ended practice can sometimes pose other challenges, such as a transitional job transforming into a permanent position. A process to address next steps after the training period is over should be an integral aspect of transitional employment programs and be reflected in individual career plans.

#### “Working at Home”

Hiring a tenant to work within the supportive housing where he/she lives can add complications that would not exist if the individual worked elsewhere. For instance, a tenant working in a security or front desk position could be put in the uncomfortable position of reporting a neighbor. As such, housing providers often prefer to have individuals work in external settings. On the other hand, there are very successful programs that see advantages to having tenants work where they live. These programs note that individuals sometimes care more about their work because it affects where they live. Challenges posed by the arrangement must be addressed through proper training and supervision of both employees and job supervisors. In-house positions for tenants are also generated within businesses that the supportive housing organization sponsors or within tenant-operated micro-businesses. Sponsors have opened bookstores, child-care centers, ice cream shops, printing shops, bakeries, and thrift stores and typically train and hire tenants to work in and manage these operations. Independently sponsored businesses provide unparalleled degrees of freedom to create training slots and job opportunities.

#### Social Entrepreneurial Ventures

Many supportive housing providers are also engaged in entrepreneurial ventures that provide revenue and real world business environments that offer training and employment opportunities for tenants. One highly successful example, Rubicon Programs Incorporated in Richmond, California, has developed several nonprofit businesses, including Rubicon Bakery and Rubicon Buildings and Grounds, creating jobs for economically disadvantaged, disabled, and formerly homeless people. Similarly, Rubicon Home Care Consortium trains public assistance recipients to become certified nurse assistants and home-care aides to serve frail older adults and younger disabled individuals.

#### Ongoing Job Support

After people start working, they sometimes need assistance in managing and retaining their positions. In many cases, ongoing job support will be an extension of the supports that were provided early in the vocational counseling process. Sometimes, an issue that required attention prior to employment will continue to pose a problem after the person is employed, such as lateness,

substance use, grooming problems, or motivation. The length of time and intensity of follow-up required after job placement will vary with each individual. As the tenant becomes more engaged in work and more pressed for time, however, he or she may not be as agreeable or available to meet with staff. For some people, offering assistance by telephone may be necessary. Ideally, tenants should be able to use the program for ongoing assistance and career planning as needed. In some employment programs, efforts to help tenants manage their jobs and advance their careers take place in ongoing workshops or training focused on workplace issues and new skills, such as:

- Entering or reentering the workforce
- Managing a disability in the workplace
- Managing supervisor and coworker relationships
- Setting career goals

When applicable, some programs use on-site job coaches to become familiar with individual work locations and to be available to come on the job site to observe and coach participants. While this can be effective with some participants, others are embarrassed by the presence of a job coach at the workplace. The service can also pose practical problems for the employer, such as liability concerns and extra people at the work site. As a result, programs use this intervention only when necessary and appropriate.

In spite of thorough assessments and lots of support, people sometimes have setbacks, experience problems in the workplace, and even lose jobs. Staff should prepare individuals for such possibilities and use these experiences as learning opportunities. Staff members can help by trying to sort out what went wrong and how to better manage next time.

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](http://www.csh.org/toolkit2services).