



Creating a Culture that Promotes Work

Key Strategies

After individuals are in a supportive housing setting, they typically express some level of interest in exploring educational or employment opportunities. Creating a culture that promotes work begins with an environment in which employment is encouraged and expected. Promoting norms that emphasize the importance of work helps to accomplish this. As supportive housing continues to mature and to expand around the nation, its capacity to address complex social problems, such as chronic unemployment, becomes increasingly sophisticated as well. In many projects, supportive housing providers have made efforts to meet and accelerate interest in work by developing programs that offer specialized employment services, job placement services, and an in-house network of supports and reinforcements that help participants to advance.

Specific strategies that have helped organizations establish a culture that promotes work include:

- Prioritizing the development of vocational and employment services in the overall design of the supportive housing services program
- Ensuring that the employment program receives a highly visible status in the organization's structure and hierarchy
- Ensuring that the staff position responsible for the overall employment program is filled by a seasoned and experienced individual
- Prioritizing proposals to fund employment services
- Having an income mix among the tenancy to include working people who can be role models and motivators for others thinking about going to work
- Focusing on employment early in the engagement process, such as inquiring about employment goals during housing intake interviews
- Arranging schedules so that the staff are available to tenants who work during the day
- Making optimum use of physical space to enhance an emphasis on employment, such as providing a comfortable location for conducting employment and job searches and having a section of an in-house library devoted to career development and employment-related materials
- Reserving staff positions within the organization for tenants and developing transitional employment and training slots
- Making resources such as computers, telephones, fax lines, desks, and transportation and clothing funds available to those who are seeking employment
- Celebrating employment-related milestones such as graduations and promotions

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.

Defining Staff Roles

The “who, how, and where” of providing employment support services vary with different program designs. Supportive services programs sometimes include employment and vocational services under general case management functions, although this is usually due to the size and/or available resources of the program. Ideally, supportive housing programs can access or operate employment services that offer a range of supports to ensure the quality and continuity of services necessary to help as many tenants as possible to succeed. Staff roles in employment programs vary depending on the design and size of the initiative. Although specific titles for staff positions will vary from program to program, the following list provides an overview of common titles and job responsibilities.

Case Managers/Service Coordinators:

The overall coordination of individualized services is usually the responsibility of the case manager/service coordinator. Typically, the role includes a range of responsibilities, such as providing individual counseling and service planning, helping to coordinate medical and mental health appointments, obtaining benefits and medical insurance, making referrals to community-based services, helping to reunite a tenant with family members, assisting with budgeting, and helping to access legal/advocacy services. Case managers also link individuals to employment and/or employment programs. By integrating employment goals into the individual service plan, case management staff are able to support the tenant and help overcome obstacles to work.

Vocational Counselors:

Also called career counselors or employment specialists, these staff members are responsible for working with program participants to develop individualized vocational plans. Vocational counselors focus on information and interventions that directly impact employment. The vocational counselor works with the case manager to integrate the vocational plan into the overall service plan. Vocational counselors identify obstacles to gaining and maintaining employment and provide ongoing assistance in reducing the negative impact of these obstacles to success. This might include, for example, recommendations for additional training or education.

Job Coaches:

Some programs use job coaches to provide on-the-job support to program participants. Coaches can assess how an individual is doing on the job in addition to providing immediate feedback, training, and assistance. Job coaches gain an understanding of the needs of the employer and can give businesses the confidence to hire program participants. In most cases, the role of the job coach is most intense when a participant first transitions into a new job.

Job Supervisors:

When sponsoring in-house training or employment positions, a job supervisor or boss is usually assigned to oversee the completion of tasks. This role is usually filled by someone who understands the job and the employee’s responsibilities. A job supervisor is usually not involved in counseling the employee on personal matters, and it is preferable that different people provide job supervision and supportive services.

Job Developers:

Employment programs frequently hire job developers to establish relationships with businesses in the community to help secure jobs for program participants. Job developers may also serve as liaisons between the program and the job site, addressing problems and issues that come up regarding specific placements.

Program Director:

Dedicated to overseeing the development of employment activities, the program director oversees all vocational and employment services.

Managing Entitlements and Public Benefits Issues

An understanding of income limits and the various reporting requirements regarding employment and public benefits/entitlements is important for all employment programs. Though providers may leave the responsibility of reporting earned income with the tenant, it is important to help him/her work out any related issues concerning the impact of income on eligibility for benefit programs, such as SSI and Medicaid. Preferably, there are staff members who are able to assist tenants to calculate the effect of earned income on benefits and help them to remain informed about any relevant changes. Medical coverage is crucial. Whenever possible, tenants should be referred to jobs that offer health insurance.

To protect individuals who are not covered by their employers, some states are developing “Medicaid Buy-In” programs in which people can purchase Medicaid benefits as their income increases above established eligibility levels. Many people have relied on public benefits for a long time, and potential changes in these arrangements can generate significant fear and anxiety, even causing reluctance to pursue employment at all. For some, despite repeated warnings about the changes in their benefits that will occur if they begin to earn income, the actual loss of these funds can be disruptive and cause some people to think about quitting.

Confidentiality/Sharing Information

The level of disclosure of clinical and diagnostic information about program participants among staff within an organization varies as a function of legal requirements, program philosophies, structure, and staffing patterns. Confidentiality issues often become thorny, however, and programs can prevent mishaps and communication problems by having guidelines from the outset about information sharing. In the average workplace, employers would not have access to an individual’s health and mental health records. Indeed, there are numerous laws and regulations, professional standards, and codes of ethics that are intended to prevent inappropriate disclosure of confidential information. In this regard, when an individual is the recipient of services in a mental health organization that also has an employment program, is all the information about him/her shared between the “service” staff and “employment” staff? Who needs to know clinical and diagnostic information and why? Who should make the determination about information that is shared? Clearly, many situations require special consideration and some may warrant legal counsel. However these questions are answered, they should not be left to the judgment of individual staff members to decide on a case-by-case basis and should be clarified in clear policies at the managerial level.

One model for information sharing is that service providers who have a counseling function (e.g., case managers, vocational counselors) have access to clinical and diagnostic information but non-clinical staff (such as job supervisors) have only limited access as defined by the organization's policies. In some cases, organizations develop a face sheet of information to be made available to non-clinical personnel. When confidential information is to be shared beyond the organization, program participants must first sign consent forms to release information. In all cases, individuals should know what information about them is being shared, with whom, and why.

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.