

Overcoming Employment Barriers for Populations Experiencing Homelessness

Overview

Research consistently shows that people experiencing homelessness want to work. In fact, many are employed, but often precariously. The broader homeless population faces a variety of barriers to employment, including the experience of homelessness itself, plus other obstacles such as lack of experience, physical or mental health barriers, and challenges related to re-entry from incarceration or hospitalization. Fortunately, “there are consistent reports in the literature that homeless people rise above the barriers and find ways to earn income from employment.”¹ Even chronically homeless populations and those facing multiple disabilities can succeed at work with “opportunity, training, and sustained support.”² Researchers with the Department of Labor’s seven-year Job Training for the Homeless Demonstration Program “found that with the appropriate blend of assessment, case management, employment, training, housing and support services, a substantial proportion of homeless individuals can secure and retain jobs and that this contributes to housing stability.”³

Many employers are reluctant to hire individuals who formerly or are currently experiencing homelessness. A study by the Chronic Homelessness Employment Technical Assistance Center (CHETA) found that provider staff members are “frequently challenged by pervasive negative stereotypes when approaching employers about hiring qualified homeless job seekers.”⁴ These stereotypes extend beyond the chronically homeless and include:⁵

- Doubts that this group of people can obtain work, or want to work;
- Questions about the motivation and capabilities and reliability of the population;
- Concerns about how they will integrate into the workplace; and
- Conceptions about appearance, dress, habits, cleanliness and the impact of the ‘popular image’ of homelessness that feeds biases.

The same study found that even participants had personal doubts and fear about overcoming barriers at least partially related to their lack of success in the past.

Trauma also plays a role in the employability of populations experiencing homelessness. For some individuals, traumatic experiences can lead to an episode of homelessness. Others experience trauma during their experience of homelessness. Thirdly, homelessness itself can be a traumatic experience.⁶

Overcoming employment barriers requires collaborations between employers, providers, and individuals experiencing homelessness to ensure that the needs of all parties are being met. To help individuals overcome their traumatic experiences, as an example, and succeed in the workplace, providers should follow a trauma-informed approach.

Principles of trauma-informed care include:⁷

- Understanding trauma and its impact;
- Promoting safety;
- Ensuring cultural competence;
- Supporting consumer control, choice and autonomy;
- Sharing power and governance;
- Integrating care;
- Promoting healing through relationships; and
- Emphasizing the possibility of recovery.

Programs need to be trauma-informed because:⁸

- Homeless families and individuals have experienced traumatic stress;
- Trauma impacts how people access services;
- Responses to traumatic stress are adaptive; and
- Trauma survivors require specific, tailored interventions.

Some people experiencing homelessness have both separate and overlapping barriers to employment, so strategies should be tailored to individual needs rather than attempting to apply one-size-fits-all solutions. One organization, the National Transitional Jobs Network (NTJN), spent a year researching the range of potential solutions that might be implemented. NTJN convened a national community of practice “to shine a spotlight on the important role of employment solutions in addressing homelessness and to identify and disseminate promising employment practices.”⁹ The result of these efforts is the “Working to End Homelessness Initiative: Best Practice Series.”¹⁰

The series represents a broadened perspective on employment programs that can help people experiencing homelessness. As emerging practices that have not been rigorously tested with populations of homeless people, these strategies are worth serious consideration in the field of knowledge. The following sections include the key points of NTJN’s four main briefs: service delivery principles and techniques, addressing diverse barriers, employment program components, and employment program models.¹¹

Service Delivery Principles and Techniques¹²

Employment programs need to be structured flexibly enough to meet individuals where they are while maintaining the ability to adapt as individual needs and realities change. Key considerations include:

- Understanding and facilitating the process of change;
- Offering employment program options that meet individual’s aptitudes, interests, and readiness to change;
- Delivering services that take into account participants’ experiences with trauma; and
- Focusing the organization, services, and program staff on prioritizing employment and reinforcing a culture of work.

Diverse Barriers to Employment and How to Address Them¹³

Helping individuals overcome their barriers to employment requires an understanding that different subpopulations face a variety of obstacles and are likely to need closely tailored interventions:

- *Families with Children* - provide access to affordable childcare, family management training, occupational skills training, and flexible employment options, in addition to income and housing supports;
- *Youth* - help develop leadership skills, engage in positive relationships with adults and practice appropriate workplace behavior, and choose a career pathway that works best for them;
- *Older Adults* - help them understand their employment potential, and tailor training and employment options to their needs;
- *Veterans* - draw from their previous military work experience and the occupational training, teamwork, and leadership skills they attained there, help manage trauma and the transition back to the civilian workforce;
- *Individuals with a Criminal Record and People Leaving Prison* - help participants navigate legal obstacles, tailor job search activities and consider employer incentives, and provide follow-along supports; and
- *Individuals with Disabling Conditions, Substance Abuse Issues, and Health Issues* - provide streamlined access to permanent supportive housing, quality health care, and benefits counseling, provide the necessary accommodations in both the employment program and the workplace, assist with anti-discrimination efforts, help participants navigate the demands of both work and health, integrate employment services with a treatment regimen including collaboration with addiction counselors and drug testing, foster social support, and work with participants to overcome substance use issues on the job.

Employment Program Components¹⁴

Employment programs require specialized components depending on the population(s) being served. NTJN identified seven components that offer the greatest promise for helping to employ individuals experiencing homelessness and that are flexible enough to be tailored to meet organizational and individual needs. For employment programs that do not offer all of these services in-house, relationships can be built with other organizations to meet participants' needs through strategic referrals. The components include:

- Person-Centered Assessment;
- Social Support;
- Work Readiness;
- Job Development;
- Retention Support;
- Reemployment Activities; and
- Case Management and Supportive Services.

Employment Program Models¹⁵

When developing an employment program, organizations have a number of models to choose from. This section provides a basic overview of seven models, but more extensive information can be found within the brief, which cover “each model’s purpose, elements, principles, funding, and research evidence, with examples from the field.”¹⁶ Models can be utilized for either workplace integration or career advancement.

Strategies for integrating people experiencing homelessness into the workplace include:

- Transitional Jobs;
- Supported Employment;
- Alternative Staffing; and
- Customized Employment.

Strategies for promoting career advancement include:

- Contextualized Basic Adult Education;
- Adult Education Bridge Programs; and
- Sector-Based Training.

Conclusion

Many people experiencing homelessness want to work. With the right blend of supports, most can overcome their personal barriers to do so successfully. Diverse models and tools exist for employment specialists and service providers to tailor their approaches for individualized jobseekers and workforce needs. Successful employment interventions can promote not only personal development and healthier habits for individuals experiencing homelessness, but also broader societal goals, including helping to prevent and end homelessness. Employment is just one component of this broader undertaking, but it is a crucial one.

¹ Long, David, John Rio and Jeremy Rosen. Employment and Income Supports for Homeless People. 2007 National Symposium on Homelessness Research. Retrieved from <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/homelessness/symposium07/long/report.pdf>.

² Ibid.

³ Shaheen, Gary and Rio, John. Recognizing Work as a Priority in Preventing or Ending Homelessness. 2007. The Journal of Primary Prevention.

⁴ Rio, John. Common Employment Strategies in the US DOL-HUD Initiative to End Chronic Homelessness Through Employment and Housing. 2008. Retrieved from <http://documents.csh.org/documents/pubs/CHETA/CommonEmploymentStrategiesECHEHSites.pdf>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ National Alliance to End Homelessness. Addressing Post-traumatic Stress Disorder Caused by Homelessness. 2012. Retrieved from http://b.3cdn.net/naeh/973478e833747853ce_a1m6bx81p.pdf.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ National Transitional Jobs Network. Working to End Homelessness Initiative. 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.heartlandalliance.org/ntjn/projects/weh-project-briefs.html>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ These categories reflect an individual brief within the series, each of which is described more fully under a separate subheading. Please refer to the specific brief for more substantial details on each topic.

¹² National Transitional Jobs Network. Service Delivery Principles and Techniques: Helping people experiencing homelessness engage in services and succeed in employment. 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.heartlandalliance.org/ntjn/ntjn-weh-principles-1-24-2012.pdf>.

¹³ National Transitional Jobs Network. Populations Experiencing Homelessness: Diverse barriers to employment and how to address them. 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.heartlandalliance.org/ntjn/ntjn-weh-populations-1-24-2012.pdf>.

¹⁴ National Transitional Jobs Network. Employment Program Components: Considerations for modifying programming for people experiencing homelessness. 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.heartlandalliance.org/ntjn/ntjn-weh-components-1-24-2012.pdf>.

¹⁵ National Transitional Jobs Network. Employment Program Models for People Experiencing Homelessness: Different approaches to program structure. 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.heartlandalliance.org/ntjn/ntjn-weh-models-1-24-2012.pdf>.

¹⁶ Ibid.