

# Working to **END** Homelessness

## Employment Program Components: Considerations for modifying programming for people experiencing homelessness

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### Working to End Homelessness Series

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Employment programs typically include assessment, job search assistance, work readiness training, occupational training, job placement, and retention services. Research and experience suggest that programs can best meet individual needs, strengths, and interests by modifying these elements to ensure flexible services that support each individual's personal and developmental needs as they transition to employment. This best practice brief highlights a menu of enhancements and examples that programs may consider in providing supportive, flexible services for individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Promising practices include:

- performing [assessments](#) that take into account individuals' needs, strengths, and interests,
- providing opportunities for [social support](#) and mentorship,
- offering enhanced options to acquire [work readiness](#) skills,
- upholding quality [job development](#) and considering customized solutions,
- including intensive [retention](#) and follow-up services,
- ensuring opportunities for participants to learn from failures and be [reconnected to employment opportunities](#), and
- making linkages to [supportive services and housing](#).

The National Transitional Jobs Network (NTJN) launched the **Working to End Homelessness Initiative** (WEH) in 2011, with support from the Butler Family Fund, to shine a spotlight on the important role of employment solutions in addressing homelessness and to identify and disseminate promising employment practices. To achieve these ends, the NTJN conducted a review of literature, met with key stakeholders and experts, and convened a national community of practice focused on employment programming for people experiencing homelessness. The community of practice includes 22 experienced workforce development professionals in 16 states that operate a diverse set of employment models including transitional jobs, supported employment, social enterprise, work readiness training, and alternative staffing and serve a diversity of populations experiencing homelessness. Throughout the course of a year professionals have identified best practices, lifted up employment solutions to serving the population, and highlighted policy and systems challenges to their work.

## Person-Centered Assessment

At the beginning of any workforce program, staff members conduct an assessment to determine the abilities, desires, experiences and barriers of new participants, and to support staff and participants in making a good match with employment opportunities. Because people experiencing homelessness have diverse needs, strengths, and interests, participants will likely benefit from an assessment that captures all of these factors, helps them learn about their service options, and empowers their decisions.

### Further Resources

- [TABE®](#)
- [WorkKeys®](#)
- [CareerScope](#)
- [Barriers to Employment Success Inventory](#)
- [HUD Lecture on Vocational Assessment](#)

### Ongoing Conversations

Ongoing conversations with participants and other stakeholders is a strategy to discern immediate and emerging needs, strengths, and interests. Here staff members work through a recursive cycle of observing and listening, collecting and interpreting information, and asking questions. Ongoing conversations are useful in learning about the participant's immediate needs and goals; readiness to change; work history, experience, and skills; educational history, work patterns and preferred environment; and strengths, challenges, and barriers.<sup>1</sup> Ongoing conversations can supplement traditional assessments such as career aptitude tests and may even replace them in models such as Individual Placement Support.

*Facilitate the process of change* – Readiness to change is a key piece in an individual's transition to employment. Ongoing conversations between staff and participants help in determining participants' readiness to change, meeting them where they are in the process of change, and tailoring services to meet their levels of engagement and aptitude.

*Keep open communication with other stakeholders* – Program staff should also communicate with participants' case managers at housing and supportive service agencies to ensure that any other needs or developments central to employment success are known. For example, programs serving individuals leaving prison can work with the parole officer to learn about obligations or restrictions that the participant may have. If family members or other trusted peers play a role in the program, they too may be a good source of information on participant needs.

### Comprehensive Needs Assessment

Programs often use comprehensive assessment tools to help determine participant needs, the best options for each individual, and provide linkages to appropriate services. Assessments can take a number of forms including:

- basic skills assessments such as the [TABE®](#) to determine educational needs,
- disability screenings and [vocational assessments](#) to determine physical and developmental needs and help participants make career choices,<sup>2</sup>
- barrier assessments such as the [Barriers to Employment Success Inventory](#) to determine barrier management needs, and
- assessments to determine population-based needs such as psychiatric assessments for people with mental health issues.<sup>3</sup>

Assessments such as these may be best offered in tandem to determine a full picture of what each individual may require to be successful in employment. For example, [LifeNet](#) in Dallas, Texas offers vocational, psychiatric, and medical assessment to comprehensively meet the needs of individuals with severe mental health issues and match them with employment opportunities.

Programs can also use financial assessments to determine financial health and help improve income. At the Financial Opportunity Center at [Rubicon Programs](#) in Richmond, California, participants in the employment program receive a Combined Financial Assessment of income, assets, debt, spending habits, and credit score. Public benefit eligibility is also determined using an online self sufficiency calculator, and application assistance is provided as needed. These assessments inform [financial stability services](#) provided in tandem with employment services.

### **Career Aptitude and Interest Assessment**

Some programs report success using standardized career aptitude and interest assessments. For example, [St. Patrick Center](#) in St. Louis, Missouri uses [CareerScope](#), a comprehensive standardized career assessment, to test for participants' career interests and aptitudes and a post-training evaluation to assess work readiness. Staff members then discuss the career assessment results with participants to help them learn about their strengths and interests and match with fitting employment opportunities. There are many other similar career exploration tools commercially available as well. Assessments such as these can be used in concert with ongoing conversations to help participants learn more about themselves and their employment options. For example, [Goodwill Industries of Greater Grand Rapids](#) uses a multiple-choice personality questionnaire, and then reviews the results with participants to help them gain self-awareness about their strengths, needs, and employment options that may be a good match.

### **Situational Assessment**

Observations of participant functioning in the workplace can assist with assessment of participants' engagement, readiness skills, and progress. Situational assessment is useful for monitoring participant abilities and progress by rating behaviors and attitudes over time in a real or simulated work position.<sup>4</sup> Situational assessments help staff members determine participant strengths, barriers, work habits, and preferences; discern unspoken abilities; and observe unhealthy workplace habits or relationships. The practice is well suited to individuals with psychiatric disorders and is considered especially useful in the Transitional Jobs and Individual Placement Support models.<sup>5</sup>

In a real work setting, the program should work with the employer to set a specific set of assessment measures in line with workplace needs. Staff members and worksite supervisors should then watch for progress and provide ongoing feedback to the participant and employer, placing the participant elsewhere if necessary.<sup>6</sup> At the [Center for Employment Opportunities](#), a work-crew structured Transitional Jobs program headquartered in New York City, worksite supervisors provide daily assessments and feedback to participants recently released from prison through the participant's individual "[Passport to Success](#)," a passport-sized handbook with supervisor feedback that participants keep with them.<sup>7</sup> The work-crew structure of the program allows for daily assessment and a record of participant progress. Situational assessment and feedback in exploratory positions such as volunteer work can also be useful in engaging participants to 'give employment a try', helping them build confidence and consider employment options.

## **Social Support**

Social supports can help individuals maintain momentum and implement a plan of action.<sup>8</sup> In the case of employment programming, a wide support group including program staff, program peers, employers, families, and legal authorities shows strong promise in helping individuals complete the employment program and maintain progress in the labor market. These groups and others may serve to widen and deepen social networks which have been shown to be critical in getting and maintaining employment, provide coaching, celebrate successes and in some cases navigate differing expectations across systems and providers.

### **Facilitate Family Support**

Bringing participants' families on board can help support employment goals for vocational rehabilitation consumers, people with psychiatric disabilities, single mothers, and formerly incarcerated individuals. Family members may help staff gather missing documentation; identify the participant's hidden interests, needs, and strengths; allow a group job search effort; help the professional check progress after program completion; and help the participant cope with the job search process. At the same time, staff should watch for participant reluctance to involve family members as dysfunctional relationships may impede progress.<sup>9</sup> In the same vein, efforts to help family members reconcile are important to rebuilding supportive social ties, yet family members may be reluctant to reunite with participants. [Rubicon Programs](#) helps participants reestablish a relationship with their estranged families by helping them meet child support obligations during their job search by negotiating reduced payment arrangements with Child Support Services. This strategy also helps reduce disincentives to work and may release a hold on the participant's driver's license.

### **Host Support Groups**

Circles and other types of support groups offer participants time to discuss their experiences, address issues, and offer advice and support to each other. These meetings may share elements with a typical group therapy session, encourage participants to take turns discussing a topic, sharing experiences, and celebrating progress. Job clubs, a type of support group, offer opportunities for jobseekers to gather and learn job search skills, share job search information,

discuss their goals and experiences, provide accountability to their goals and plans, provide feedback on sensitive issues, offer peer support during setbacks, and celebrate successes.<sup>10</sup> Research shows that job club participants are more likely to find employment in the competitive labor market and earn higher wages, and older jobseekers who participate in job clubs have also been found to experience lower levels of depression.<sup>11</sup>

### **Host Peer Celebrations of Success**

Celebrations can also foster peer support, self-worth, and a sense of accomplishment. For example, participants at [Chrysalis Enterprises](#) in California ring a bell at the front desk when they have achieved employment, at which point all staff and participants on duty come celebrate with the participant. [St. Joseph the Worker](#) in Arizona furthers the message that participants have the strengths necessary to achieve their goals by recognizing and celebrating participant milestones on a “Client Success Board” at the program office. Staff members help participants add their picture, milestones, and advice for other participants to the board so that they may revisit their progress and celebrate successes throughout the program. Staff and participants alike are also celebrated through special events. [St. Patrick Center](#) in St. Louis, Missouri features success stories on boards throughout the program building and features ongoing success videos where participants share their story. At [The Doe Fund](#) in New York and Philadelphia, staff offers monthly, quarterly, and annual events to afford ongoing access to a supportive community and additional services. [Rubicon Programs](#) in Richmond, California helps graduates organize monthly “alumni events” to build networks and offer a chance for new graduates to get advice from those who have been successful in employment.

### **Provide Worksite Peer Support and Mentoring**

Working in an environment with others who share common circumstances or work positions may function as an informal peer support group in which members provide understanding, confidence, positive reinforcement, and role modeling. Peer mentoring may offer an opportunity for relatable individuals to offer advice and encouragement, serve as an example that success is possible, and model good work habits.<sup>12</sup> Former participants who have been hired as permanent staff may be good candidates for a mentoring role. Programs may also invite former participants who have successfully transitioned into the workforce to come back and visit with current participants and encourage employers to select staff as peer mentors at the worksite.<sup>13</sup>

Within programs that offer work-crew or in-house employment placement opportunities cohorts of participants often naturally form support groups or relationships which can serve to provide ongoing positive support while individuals are engaged in the program as well as widen and deepen social networks which can be beneficial to finding and keeping employment in the future. Peer support and mentorship with staff in a competitive unsubsidized job is especially important for individuals with a mental illness. Staff who have similarly worked through mental health issues and succeeded in employment may provide support and hope for continued progress, playing a significant role in participants’ experience as they explore employment and work through issues on the job.<sup>14</sup>

## Work Readiness

For jobseekers to successfully find a job, keep it, and advance, they may need to develop core academic, work readiness, and life skills. Jobseekers typically need to be able to engage an employer and meet workplace norms, understand and follow written directions, manage personal affairs, and mitigate behavioral issues. These skills may be attained in a classroom or in the workplace with job coaching and [employer feedback](#) and may be combined to better support individual needs.

### Foster Core Academic Skills

Basic literacy, math, and writing skills and the ability to apply them in real work situations are considered essential to attaining an entry-level job and advancing. For example, individuals should be able to fill out reports, apply written directions, and calculate measurements on the job. Click here to learn more about innovative basic adult education models.

### Foster and Reinforce Work Readiness Skills

Work readiness abilities such as problem solving and timeliness are key tenants of success in a workplace. Work readiness training teaches core competencies including problem-solving, critical thinking, oral communication, work ethic and habits, interpersonal skills, teamwork, adaptability, and technological skills. To prepare participants for the workplace, work readiness training also addresses potentially problematic perceptions, habits, and behaviors through classroom training, teaching jobseekers workplace norms such as good attitude, timeliness, and the ability to follow directions. Work readiness training should:<sup>15</sup>

- prepare participants to write resumes, complete applications, and interview effectively,
- teach effective communication and workplace behavior,
- improve interpersonal, conflict management, and problem solving skills,
- identify skills and strengths, and
- recognize successes and help overcome setbacks.

While many programs offer work readiness training before job placement, assistance may also be offered at different points in the employment program and combined with additional supports during and thereafter. For example, some transitional job programs offer work readiness or contextualized adult basic education programming concurrently with time-limited paid work to reinforce education through practical experience. Many supported employment programs forego training and help participants rapidly enter the competitive labor market and help participants overcome barriers and build skills through one-on-one coaching and case management. Finally, work readiness courses can be supplemented with additional supports throughout the program and employment. For example, [Goodwill Industries of Houston](#) helps participants prepare for employment through a combination of courses in adult education and literacy, work readiness and job search skills, life skills, and interpersonal skills with ongoing job coaching, and offers additional training as needed after job placement to reaffirm lessons and overcome new obstacles.

## Provide Life Skills Training

Life skills help individuals experiencing homelessness manage or mitigate barriers to self-sufficiency in their everyday lives. Life skills may include family care, time management, anger management, and financial management among others. Programs may use life-skills curricula that are taught in a classroom. Here is a glimpse into some typical life-skill courses:

- *Self and family care courses* support participants who may have difficulty navigating the work/life balance. In the Employment Preparation Training at [Inspiration Corporation's](#) The Employment Project (TEP), staff members talk with participants about self-care and maintaining a healthy work/life balance. Staff members further equip participants with yoga and meditation skills to help them maintain personal balance. Likewise, [HomeFront](#) in New Jersey teaches time management shortcuts such as bulk cooking to help ease the burden of managing both work and family as a single parent.
- *Flexible classrooms* can be helpful in addressing personal skills and barriers. The [Center for the Homeless](#) in Indiana developed a curriculum sensitive to workplace and personal barriers as they arise. Here the classroom is structured like a workplace and takes advantage of issues such as tardiness and disruptive behavior as they arise by tailoring the lesson plan to topics such as time management, respect, conflict resolution, and teamwork in the moment.
- *Financial management skill building* is a means of helping individuals make the best use of earned income and benefits. Bundling financial services, benefits, and employment services has been shown to improve self-sufficiency and a number of providers make financial management training a mandatory program component of life-skills training.<sup>16</sup> For example, [The Doe Fund](#) in New York City and Philadelphia mandates savings and contributions to program expenses to instill fiscal responsibility while providing workshops on budgeting, financial goal-setting, credit information, and debt repayment. At [Rubicon Programs'](#) Financial Opportunity Center program in Richmond, California, supports financial literacy through a [Combined Financial Assessment](#), Income Supports, and a two week financial stability and employment workshop. Ongoing financial and career coaching up to three years is available for individuals experiencing homelessness and people leaving prison. Here participants learn efficient spending habits and how to open a savings account, build assets, and improve credit.

## Job Development

Job development focused on identifying and cultivating employment opportunities for participants is essential to employment programming. To help participants find and keep work in the competitive labor market, many programs make placement arrangements with employers in the private, public, and non-profit sectors. This section outlines what works in developing jobs for disadvantaged job seekers and people experiencing homelessness.

### **Develop a Business Culture**

One way to engage employers is to ensure that the employment program looks, feels, and acts like a business. This may be accomplished through requiring staff to wear business dress and apply common sales terms and activities such as business lunches. A common practice is to hire people with a sales background as job developers to build a business-friendly brand in person-to-person contact.<sup>17</sup>

### **Research Employers for a Solid Match**

Job developers should research industry sectors to identify those that are friendly to the population, have a demand for labor, and in which there is a match between jobseeker strengths and needs and employer strengths and needs.<sup>18</sup> The job developer may also wish to seek businesses that are open to flexible arrangements such as customized employment, which involves tailoring job positions to the participant's strengths and abilities that meet an employer's needs.<sup>19</sup> Job developers should determine if a workplace is a good match for participants, including questioning the employer about scheduling, workload, advancement, turnover, and safety. They may ask indirect questions about drug testing and perceptions of individuals with a criminal background to determine worksite suitability. Beyond one-on-one conversations with employers, job developers can attend industry events and job fairs, join local chambers of commerce, or use local labor market information to identify growing industry sectors. When researching and developing employers as good matches for program participants, job developers may want to consider:

- seeking out employers who are flexible and/or who share a social purpose mission and are willing to field the risk of turnover when appropriate for participants that need to explore numerous opportunities with multiples chances to fail;
- securing a formal agreement such as a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to ensure the reliability of the employer relationship; and
- fostering ongoing communication with the employer and program.

Since employers are a key source of information and feedback on participant progress, programs should take into consideration an employer's ability to provide timely feedback either directly to the participant or the job developer. Additionally very thinly staffed organizations may not be appropriate as employer sites for individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness and usually neither are those with a "sink or swim" culture for new employees, or those with very competitive cultures.<sup>20</sup>

### **Communicating With Employers**

A "business case" approach to job development educates employers on the strengths of the program and participant abilities and emphasizes how hiring program participants can be a smart business decision rather than just an act of altruism. Job developers should listen closely to employers to determine their largest hiring needs and concerns, work to help resolve it, and discuss with employers how the program can provide a service to help them with their challenges. Staff members then often showcase the following about their programs:<sup>21</sup>



- program services such as candidate screening, case management supports, job retention services, and training;
- positive research evidence for their program and model; and
- financial incentives such as the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) and subsidized or partially subsidized wages.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, if an organization operates transitional jobs, internships, or job shadowing programs, job developers can highlight real-work examples of the participant’s strengths, skills and progress.

*Prevention* is a good strategy for overcoming employer concerns. Job developers can prepare by researching the employer to ensure a good match and begin touting program performance and success stories at the beginning. Once the job developer has met with the employer and encountered an objection, they may:

- reference other happy employer clients,
- schedule a site visit to overcome stereotypes,
- point out the differences between different types of personal barriers such as between a petty and felony conviction, and
- begin an employer relationship by placing participants with fewer barriers and then later approach the employer about hiring individuals with greater needs.

Programs can also make the “community case” which means showing that employers could partner with employment programs to deliver community renewal and improve self-sufficiency for individuals in need. Seeking employers who have a desire to contribute to a social cause or “give back” to their community, often in small businesses or community organizations, is relevant for some providers. This may be an especially important strategy for supported employment providers as they rely on employer flexibility including the willingness to field the risk of separating with employees after a short duration while participants explore work in the competitive labor market and work through barriers on-the-job. Here, touting the research evidence and program outcomes is important in building trust with employers and the view that efforts will be worth their while.

### **Build Long-Term Employer Partnerships**

Building long-term partnerships helps support reliable and robust placement opportunities. To achieve these partnerships, programs should focus on maintaining community rapport, involving employers in the program, and rewarding employers for their service to the community.<sup>23</sup>

*Build a strong reputation* – Developing wide local visibility and a strong reputation contributes to winning and maintaining partnerships with employers and other stakeholders. Build on initial successes and educate employers, the media, policymakers, and other stakeholders on the program’s strong outcomes, role in the community, and how stakeholders can be involved. One of the most important pieces of developing a strong reputation is to ensure client trust. To develop these relationships, programs can incorporate the following:<sup>24</sup>

- follow through on all commitments made in the engagement phase to build integrity;
- be honest if you cannot currently meet an employer’s needs in order to build trust for later; and
- build employers into the program to ensure them that their interests are met and leverage their participation to vet the program among fellow employers.

*Build employers into the program* – To better meet employer needs, keep partners engaged, and prepare jobseekers for employment, providers should integrate employers into the program. For example, programs may bring employers to speak at trainings and to discuss what it takes to work for them. Employers may sit on boards of directors or special committees and help keep the program abreast of emerging local labor market demands. Another way to ensure employer involvement is to use feedback surveys to determine program strengths and weaknesses, invest in core strengths, and solve customer service issues.<sup>25</sup>

*Reward employers* – Business leaders who hire program participants may appreciate receiving thanks and accolades (although this should be done tactfully as not all employers may want publicity on program involvement). To reward employers, programs employ the following techniques:

- ask employees and customers to thank the employers;
- offer award and celebration events to offer employers praise and motivation to stay involved - for example, [The Doe Fund](#) cultivates and maintain employer relationships by inviting employer partners to an annual employer partner breakfast to recognize an “employer partner of the year” as well as successful graduates; and
- praise employers who have consented to being publically recognized through communications efforts, including newsletters and news stories.

## Retention Support

Employment retention supports such as check-ins, one-on-one coaching, and financial incentives promote staying in unsubsidized employment. Longitudinal studies show that retention support is essential to improving long-term employment and earnings outcomes for disadvantaged jobseekers including individuals experiencing homelessness.

Retention services should begin at program intake with supportive staff members who help the participant learn life skills and work readiness skills, and/or plan strategies to manage barriers in advance of employment.<sup>26</sup>

### Further Resources

- [Keeping Up the Good Work](#)
- [The Road to Good Employment Retention](#)
- [HUD Retention Lecture](#)

### Check-In Regularly and Provide Ongoing Support

Once the participant is employed post-program, best practices include staff making periodic follow-up contacts to ensure that the participant’s needs are met, help the participant manage workplace difficulties by clarifying employer expectations and concerns, and help participants

work through workplace conflicts. To successfully attach participants to work for the long run, research suggests that retention services last for at least six months, and involve three or more check-ins with the participant a month.<sup>27</sup> It is important to check in regularly with the participant throughout the early period of employment; a promising schedule is daily interactions for the first week, weekly for weeks 2 to 12, bi-weekly from weeks 13 through 26, and monthly after 27 weeks.<sup>28</sup> A synthesis of research on supported employment shows that an indefinite period of follow-along supports is essential for individuals with a mental illness.<sup>29</sup>

### **Provide Follow-Up Resources**

Tools that can remind participants about supports and resources available to them once they have found employment can promote employment maintenance and preempt challenges that may cause them to lose employment. Wallet-sized cards that include tips, program information, and key retention contacts are a useful tool for keeping in touch with graduates and offering them ongoing follow-along support as they need it.<sup>30</sup> For example, [St. Joseph the Worker](#) in Phoenix, Arizona provides business cards with program information and contacts to help participants keep in touch and access any other services they may need. The [Frontline Focus Institute](#) at the Chicago Jobs Council offers a template for cards like these with staff contact information on one side and retention tips on the other.

### **Link to Financial and Nonmonetary Incentives**

Financial incentives provided to participants or employers have been associated with successful program participation, job placement, and retention.<sup>31</sup> By providing access to gift cards, wage supplements, and retention bonuses to participants and graduates, programs can provide needed income and financial motivation to continue succeeding in employment.<sup>32</sup> For example, [The Doe Fund](#) in New York City and Philadelphia gives program graduates incentives to maintain employment, housing, and recovery by offering a \$1,000 grant paid in \$200 installments over the first five months after graduation contingent on passing monthly drug tests and documenting housing and employment. Other incentives for continued success and program engagement include access or linkages to resources such as child care and transportation, and invitations to alumni events such as celebratory dinners.<sup>33</sup> Tax credits can be meaningful incentives as well. Access to the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) may serve as an indirect retention incentive by increasing the program graduate's take-home pay.<sup>34</sup>

## **Reemployment Activities**

Jobseekers improve at their own pace and may need flexibility to leave a specific job, learn from mistakes, and enter another job that better suits their needs.<sup>35</sup> Reemployment services can help participants achieve their employment goals by leaving a job in a professional manner, learning from exploration and mistakes, and seeking more appropriate employment. Programs offering reemployment services should:<sup>36</sup>

- *Seek to rapidly reemploy jobseekers (within 3 to 4 weeks) to avoid a long spell without work or income. When possible, programs may help participants find a new position before leaving their current job.*

- *Identify reasons for job loss* by communicating with the participant and the employer about job performance. This may help the program develop a better job plan with the participant, leverage more appropriate supportive services, coach participants on managing barriers that emerged on the job, and watch for these highlighted issues in the retention phase.
- *Help participants move among jobs* that allow exploration and skill building in specific tasks and sectors.<sup>37</sup>
- *Offer ongoing access to services* such as job search assistance, financial assistance, or help applying for other benefits to mitigate income related barriers to job search.<sup>38</sup>

Models such as Transitional Jobs and Individual Placement Support may be ideal for allowing participants to explore work, learn to work through real-world experience, and learn from mistakes on the job. For example, [Roca, Inc.](#) in Boston, Massachusetts offers a transitional work experience that plans for mistakes in meeting workplace expectations and requirements. Participants may be “fired” from their transitional jobs, and presented with conditions that must be met before meeting to discuss reinstatement.<sup>39</sup> At [Central City Concern](#) in Portland, Oregon the employment specialist works with like-minded community-based employers to provide employment opportunities with the awareness that participants may leave employment early. If participants are fired or otherwise desires to leave employment, they may work with the specialist to reassess goals and issues, learn from mistakes and exploration, develop a new job plan, and seek a more suitable position with tailored retention support.

## Case Management and Supportive Services

Case managers play a special role in supporting participants and in linking them to services such as housing or child care. Research on employment services to disadvantaged jobseekers, including individuals experiencing homelessness, suggests that participants are most successful when they have access to the supportive services that meet their individual needs.<sup>40</sup> Case managers are integral resources in building referral relationships with supportive service providers, public systems, and other resources in the continuum of care, in addition to helping participants navigate services and working with other service providers to provide integrated resources that holistically meet individual needs. Programs should offer ongoing, timely, and holistic case management to individuals as they need it – whether that is through the employment program or a partnership with another program.

### Important Areas of Case Management Assistance

These are some of the critical areas of assistance case managers can provide to individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness:

- *Link to Resources to Meet Basic Needs:* An individual’s basic needs may need to be met before employment is pursued, although their limited resources make employment a priority. Food, clothing, hygiene and shelter are important foundations for employment.<sup>41</sup>

- *Assist with Access to Personal Records:* Participants may have lost basic identification and need help accessing identification such as a driver's license, birth certificate, social security card, or school transcripts. Programs should help participants by placing orders for birth certificates and other forms of identification and by cleaning up traffic tickets to lift bars on obtaining a driver's license. For example, [Drive to Work](#) in Richmond, Virginia assists low-income and formerly incarcerated individuals restore driving privileges by offering services such as payment plans for overdue fines and petitioning for restricted licenses.
- *Link to Housing:* Housing is a critical resource in achieving personal stability, safety, and health while reducing reliance on more expensive resources.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, a stable address is typically required to apply for a job. Numerous studies show that health and employment outcomes can be bolstered by access to housing integrated with supportive services.<sup>43</sup> Programs should become aware of housing resources in their communities and build meaningful relationships with housing providers.
- *Provide Transportation Assistance and Work Materials:* Transportation is frequently referenced as the number one need of jobseekers experiencing homelessness, as is true for many other low-income workers as well. Employment programs often provide public transportation vouchers, while some offer direct bussing, but the logistics and legal liabilities may make vouchers an easier approach for programs in metropolitan areas. Work materials such as boots, tools, and uniforms are also important for programs to provide when an employer requires that new hires purchase their own equipment.
- *Link to Communication Services:* To overcome the job search barriers posed by the lack of a stable address and phone number, experts suggest that programs should offer the program address and an individual phone number to put on job applications and for making phone calls.<sup>44</sup> [Inspiration Corporation](#) and the [Cara Program](#) offer telephone services through the [Community Voicemail](#) program, and internet access at their locations. Individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness may qualify for a subsidized cellular phone service through the [Safelink Wireless Program](#) and providers such as [Goodwill Industries of Greater Grand Rapids](#) provide cell phones and minutes through their own programs.<sup>45</sup>
- *Assist with Applications for Income Supports & Other Public Benefits:* Linking participants up with income supports can help participants make ends meet.<sup>46</sup> Income supports may include Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Social Security Insurance or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSI/SSDI), benefits through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, tax credits such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), nutritional support such as Supplementary Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), and housing vouchers such as rapid re-housing under Section 8 of the U.S. Housing Act.

### **Building and Leveraging Referral Relationships**

Although some large multi-service organizations have the capacity to meet all participant needs under one roof, most program providers leverage community and public resources to fit the missing pieces in helping participants manage and overcome obstacles to employment. For example, [St. Patrick Center](#) in St. Louis, Missouri provides 28 programs in-house for housing and

education, mental health and substance use services, and employment and training. Additional services such as GED courses and a medical clinic are provided through linkages to 11 partnering providers. Some services help meet special needs and may need to be delivered by specialist organizations. For example, many programs provide some transportation assistance, housing, work materials, and financial assistance in house, while special supportive services such as legal and mental health services are most commonly provided through partnerships and referral networks, often informally.

### **Determining Whether to Provide Services In-House or Via Referral**

Welcome House of Northern Kentucky uses a four-step process for assessing referral needs:

1. Evaluate what your organization does well
2. Summarize what populations you commonly serve and what their crucial needs are
3. Determine the largest gaps between your organization's services and participant needs
4. Find other organizations that offer services that fill these gaps

Many organizations invest in building and maintaining referral relationships to meet the diverse service needs of their participants. To do so providers:

- seek to better understand population needs by sitting on boards and attending trainings in the population-specific service community;
- assess organizational service needs and strengths;
- research what local organizations provide and need to determine mutually beneficial referral relationships;
- achieve strong visibility in the community through print ads, posters, email blasts, and social media;
- build one-on-one relationships with upper-level and case management staff through one-on-one outreach, tagging along with colleagues, and attending regular or population-specific community service meetings; and
- maintain referral relationships through regular meetings, electronic knowledge sharing, and ongoing one-on-one contact including social calls.

Maintaining regular contact through formal meetings and informal social calls helps ensure referral processes are working. Resources are often scarce and it is important for staff members to make program participants a priority for professionals in their referral networks. Two promising strategies for fostering these ground-level relationships is to train staff on building professional relationships and inviting local service providers to meet and educate staff on the services they provide.

One-on-one contact and regular bi-weekly or monthly meetings between agencies provide opportunities to share information about programmatic changes which allows the employment program to quickly adjust referrals and take advantage of new opportunities. When meetings are between upper-level management, it is important to ensure that critical knowledge is relayed to the ground-level staff that regularly interacts with supportive service providers.

## Conclusion

Individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness often require supportive, flexible services that meet their needs, strengths, and interests in order to find employment, stay employed and be successful in the labor market. Employment programs for this population should consider building on standard program components and the current strengths of their program or local community with modifications that meet participant needs, further skill development, and support ongoing success. Policymakers and other stakeholders should consider these modifications when writing plans to end homelessness and designing workforce initiatives that serve the most disadvantaged. – **Leveraging and supporting a set of supportive, flexible employment program options is critical in supporting employment success.**

For more information please contact the [National Transitional Jobs Network](#). Our other briefs in the *Working to End Homelessness: Best Practice Series* include:

- Service Delivery Principles and Techniques: Helping people experiencing homelessness engage in services and succeed in employment
- Populations Experiencing Homelessness: Diverse barriers to employment and how to address them
- Employment Program Models for People Experiencing Homelessness: Different approaches to program structure

The National Transitional Jobs Network (NTJN) is a coalition of city, state, and federal policy makers; community workforce organizations; anti-poverty nonprofit service providers and advocacy organizations committed to advancing and strengthening Transitional Jobs programs around the country so that people with barriers to employment can gain success in the workplace and improve their economic lives and the economic conditions of their communities. The NTJN supports a constituency of over 5,000 active members and stakeholders across the country.

The NTJN is a project of Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights.



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