Working to END Homelessness

Populations Experiencing Homelessness: Diverse barriers to employment and how to address them

National Transitional Jobs Network

People experience homelessness for many reasons including financial insecurity, a lack of affordable housing, and difficulty accessing services such as medical care.[1] The risk for homelessness is especially high among certain groups including low-income families, disadvantaged youth, older adults not yet eligible for Social Security, military veterans, individuals with criminal backgrounds, and individuals with disabling conditions.[2] There can be significant overlap between these groups and an individual can face multiple barriers to employment and housing. These can include:[3]
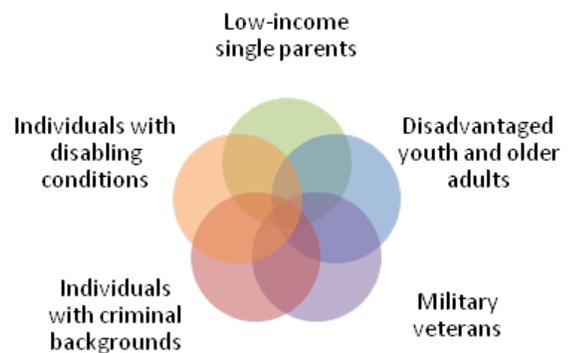
- Low education and literacy
- Work history gaps
- Lack of transportation
- Family obligations
- Lack of stable address or phone
- Lack of hygiene or clothing
- Low self-esteem
- Poor health

- Physical disabilities
- Mental health issues
- Substance use issues
- Fear of losing public benefits
- Criminal records
- Weak labor markets
- Weak social skills or networks
- Discrimination

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.

Effective employment programs take special care when serving individuals facing these barriers and often draw on a number of population-specific strategies in providing individualized service. There are many ways in which programs address population-specific needs. For some groups linking with specialized support services, such as child care or mental health care, is important. For some it may be leadership development or help building confidence. For others it may mean turning a prior experience into a skill or asset, such as time in the military or training while incarcerated. This best practice brief outlines the common employment barriers for these populations and provides considerations for tailoring employment services and prioritizing supportive services to best meet their needs.

Families with Children

Families are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population with a 20 percent increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness in families from 2007 to 2010. Families experiencing homelessness are predominantly comprised of single mothers with young children, although the number of families that include men is rising.[4] Families are more likely to enter homelessness temporarily for shorter periods of time and many do so after experiencing housing foreclosure or leaving a "doubled-up" or co-habitating living arrangement with friends, relatives, or acquaintances.[5] Having sufficient economic resources is the greatest predictor of becoming housed among families experiencing homelessness, but low-income single parents often face significant barriers to earning sufficient income, such as not having a high school diploma or GED, limited work-related skills, and short irregular work histories.[6] In addition, these parents often experience trauma, exhibit high rates of depression, and may have weak social networks.[7] Moreover, unreliable childcare arrangements are a central risk factor for missing or leaving work among single parents with children six years old or younger.[8]

Further Resources

- Principles of Care for Families Experiencing Homelessness
- Why Skills Matter

Parents of homeless families have many strengths including a desire to stay with their children and to care about their wellbeing, and can be resilient and creative in meeting their needs. These can be powerful skills and motivating factors when it comes to engagement in employment programming. Helping families manage their barriers is essential for making stable employment within reach.[9] To help families navigate personal and structural barriers to employment, programs may offer access to affordable childcare, family management training, occupational skills training, and flexible employment options, in addition to income and housing supports.

Secure Stable Childcare
Childcare is essential to engagement in employment programs and securing employment. Lack of childcare is a significant barrier to employment and childcare services are critical in helping many families with children transition to work.[10] Some programs that serve parents with young children offer in-house childcare services and education alongside job training and placement,

but caution that limited program resources make quickly finding external childcare a priority. While programs may help single parents with young children gain more reliable childcare by coaching them on making backup arrangements with family and friends, many single parents experiencing homelessness have weak social networks and experts suggest that it may be more effective to help families transition to center-based care.[11] In order to support participants in arranging center-based care, providers should consider building referral relationships with child care providers and other child care providers. Center-based childcare may pose a financial burden on families and programs should be sure to provide access to childcare subsidies such as state childcare assistance programs.[12] A number of studies show the positive employment impact of childcare subsidies and programs should use them when available.[13] Parents may benefit from provider support in mapping the distance between the participant's residence, employer and childcare providers in making a decision about child care. Regardless of what childcare decisions participants' select, providers should coach participants in establishing back-up childcare in case of emergencies.

Help Parents Strengthen Household Management Skills
Family life-skills training can address issues such as time management, self-esteem, personal and family health, and financial management among other things identified to support participant employment goals. For example HomeFront in New Jersey (a multi-service organization offering housing, employment, and supportive services to families experiencing homelessness) engages families in their housing programs with resources and training to help support family self-sufficiency. Resources include permanent housing search assistance, donated furniture, clothing, food, and services rendered by local volunteers. In addition to these resources, staff members help participants develop skills such as financial and family management. In one of HomeFront's transitional housing programs, participants learn how to save money by working and paying into a savings account available upon program exit. Staff further point to how helping single parents streamline care-giving tasks helps balance family and work life. For example, a Crockpot cooking course focused on preparing easy, healthy meals helps single parents maximize time while offering quality care to family members. Moreover, these lessons may help participants see that balancing multiple responsibilities is possible, inspiring hope and confidence.

Offer a Range of Work and Advancement Opportunities
In combination with the right mix of supports parents may benefit from occupational skills training and flexible job placement as an avenue of career advancement and earnings capable of maintaining self-sufficiency. A range of studies shows positive outcomes for single mothers with children in occupational skills training.[14] Additionally single mothers may benefit from flexible work schedules, strong communication between the program and employer, and a range of sector specific placement options.[15] For example, Project Hope in Boston, Massachusetts primarily serves low-income single mothers experiencing or at risk of homelessness by linking them to a range of training and job placement opportunities with local hospitals. Here participants are provided adult education, job search training, and six weeks in an administrative internship with work readiness training, occupational skills training, and linkages to supportive services. Participants then enter entry-level positions matched to their needs and credentials in patient registration, medical records, secretarial work, general service, and call center work, with access to career advancement opportunities.

Link Parents to Income Supports and Housing Assistance
Low-skilled jobs seekers often find work in low-wage sectors which do not always pay enough to cover housing costs, putting some families at risk of cycling back into homelessness.[16] Income supports such as those available through a state's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program and nutritional assistance such as Supplementary Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) can support families as they transition to work. As participants earn income, providers should offer linkages to free tax preparation services and ensure that participants are aware of and receiving tax credits such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) which can bolster earned income. Affordable housing and housing assistance vouchers can minimize time spent homeless and provide resources for single parents to transition to work more quickly.[17]

Youth

Youth ages 18 to 24 that experience homelessness have often aged out of foster care or left their family household due to conflict, violence, and abuse.[18] They often face numerous barriers to employment including lack of experience managing adult life, poor work histories, low education, few occupational and work readiness skills, a lack of adequate social networks, and difficulties trusting authority figures.[19] These youth are at risk for experiencing further barriers such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), engaging in illegal activities, single parenthood, substance use, or exacerbated mental illness.[20] Good mental health is the strongest predictor of successful youth employment after a training program and so youth with mental health issues should be given special support.[21]

Further Resources

- Best Practices for Youth Employment Programs
- Research Review for At-Risk Youth

Youth experiencing homelessness often are resilient and creative in meeting their needs. They are often eager to learn new things and build meaningful relationships. Program providers can focus on fostering transitions to employment and adulthood by helping youth develop leadership skills in their own lives and communities, participate in positive relationships with adults and practice appropriate workplace behavior, and choose a career pathway that works best for them.[22]

Build Youth Leadership Skills
Community leadership development is an effort to help youth take responsibility in their lives and communities, and can assist youth in the transition to adult working life.[23] Community leadership development may be achieved through peer role modeling, staff role modeling, adult mentoring, leadership classes, and work experience, in addition to a clear culture of responsibility in the employment program.[24] Youth should be coached on taking charge of their own success and making positive contributions to the community, and be held accountable to a reliable program with high expectations, clear rules and roles, tight schedules, and concrete objectives.[25] To ensure performance on this key component, leadership development should be

required for graduation from the employment program, measured in staff performance reviews, and furthered through regular meetings and trainings.[26]

Help Youth Develop Work Readiness Skills through Adult Mentoring
Adult mentoring supports youth developing work readiness skills through trusting relationships with positive role models. Supportive relationships with teachers, counselors, employers, or specially designated mentors may help mitigate barriers to employment such as difficulty trusting authority and managing adult life.[27] Mentors may be especially effective at fostering work readiness skills by helping youth write resumes, prepare for interviews, and develop professional networks.[28] Family members may play a useful role as well, but programs should be careful to watch for dysfunctional interactions that may cause harm.[29] Positive mentoring relationships should be constantly reaffirmed throughout employment or educational programs and secured through careful oversight. Evidence from the field suggests that mentoring programs should weave mentorship and self-responsibility into the entire program including classroom instruction, case management, and skills development and ensure the safety and reliability of mentoring by entering a written agreement with adult sponsors.[30]

Offer Individualized Opportunities to Advance in Employment
Individualized and mixed employment options are shown to yield significant long-term employment outcomes for youth in a number of studies.[31] For example, a random assignment evaluation of the Conservation and Youth Service Corps shows that youth perform better when they can choose services that meet their individual needs, and that programs combining education and work experience show stronger outcomes that either component alone.[32] These efforts may be especially promising when they lead to industry-recognized credentials that meet growing demand or provide on-ramps to career-driven secondary and post-secondary education. For example, youth at The Doe Fund in New York City and Philadelphia (a multi-service Transitional Jobs, sector training, and housing provider) tend to become more engaged in the employment program when they are able to select from a range of opportunities to explore, earn credentials, and advance in the sectors of their choice.

Older Adults

Individuals who have not yet reached the minimum age for Social Security and other benefits targeted for seniors such as housing assistance, may face increased risk of homelessness and chronic unemployment, and are the least likely among homeless populations to find and keep a job.[33] Barriers to employment for this population may include work history gaps, skills mismatched with current demands of the labor market, weak social networks, and the chronic diseases and disabilities associated with aging, including loss of hearing, weak vision, poor memory, and cognitive issues.[34] Furthermore, employers may assume that older workers experiencing

Further Resources

- Senior Service America Resource Center
- National Governor's Association Resources

homelessness are less skilled, unable to keep pace with the contemporary work culture, and might work fewer years.[35] These and other barriers may further result in social isolation, depression, and negative feelings about employment.[36]

An advantage older adults bring to a job search is years of experience in work and in life that can be used to see their value to employers. To best help older adults become successful in employment, providers should help them understand their employment potential, and tailor training and employment options to their needs.

Help Older Adults and Employers Understand their Employment Potential
Because both employers and older adults may hold a skeptical view of their employment chances, efforts to address negative perceptions are important in helping older adults build confidence with themselves and with employers. Encouraging relationships with program staff and peer support structures such as group counseling and job clubs show strong impacts on employment, earnings,[37] and reduced levels of depression among older adult jobseekers.[38] For example, the Aging Worker Initiative at Goodwill Industries of Houston takes a strengths-based approach to address feelings of despair, intimidation, and shame by coaching older adult jobseekers on the value of their abilities and years of experience, and on the importance of selling this experience to employers.

Tailor Training Options to Older Adult Needs
Attention to training needs is of special importance for this population. Training programs should take the participants' physical, mental and social needs into consideration.[39] Furthermore, training may need to be focused on practical application of ideas and concepts, and be explicitly relevant to employment. Integrating multiple methods such as lecture-based training, modeling, and active performance have been shown to be effective when training older learners.[40]

Offer Accommodating Employment Opportunities
Workplace accommodations such as Customized Employment can help older adult participants manage weak hearing, vision, reaction time, and memory. Co-locating employment, housing, and services is another option that may allow older jobseekers to "age-in-place" at an easily accessible location.[41] Because older adults will likely benefit from an approach that focuses on the value of their experience, empowering their job search and placement in positions of their choice is important as well.[42] Finally, other efforts to help individuals with disabling conditions may be appropriate for this population.

Veterans

Veterans experience disproportionately high rates of homelessness and chronic homelessness. Veterans often face numerous obstacles to employment that may include difficulty adjusting from military culture, social isolation, service-related physical disabilities, substance use, a criminal record, traumatic brain injury (TBI) and mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PSTD).[43] Although veterans often have transferable skills stemming from military experience, these skills are sometimes difficult to translate to the civilian labor market[44] and newly discharged veterans may experience difficulty transitioning from a military to a civilian work culture.[45]

The chronic pain and neurological issues associated with TBI may pose barriers to employment such as headaches, dizziness, irritability, and memory problems.[46] Furthermore, PTSD is often caused by trauma from military conflict and can result in avoidance of unpredictable stimuli, lack of hope for the future, heightened irritability, interpersonal issues, flashbacks and other issues.[47] These symptoms lead to less employment and may pose barriers on the job.[48] Those who experience trauma as a result of sexual assault or harassment while in the military, are also at heightened risk for PTSD and homelessness.[49] Female veterans experiencing homelessness may also have childcare related barriers to employment as a disproportionate share are single parents compared to male veterans.[50] Finally, a dishonorable discharge from military service can affect both hiring and eligibility for employment programs such as the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) and many other veteran services and supports.[51]

Veterans experiencing homelessness can draw from their previous military work experience and the occupational training, teamwork, and leadership skills they attained there.
Strategies for helping veterans experiencing homelessness attain and keep employment should include efforts to help manage trauma and transition back to the civilian workforce. Providers should also address barriers such as legal issues, disabling conditions, or unstable childcare situations that veterans may face.

Help Veterans Manage Trauma
Programs can help veterans manage trauma related barriers by identifying the signs of trauma and offering appropriate services. Program staff should be aware that some mild cases of TBI are difficult to detect and watch for recurring symptoms.[52] For PTSD, staff members should watch for avoidance, heightened anxiety, being easily startled, strong irritable reactions to minimal provocation, poor sleep, nightmares and flashbacks, and detached behavior.[53] To help veterans manage the effects of TBI and PTSD, providers should consider tailoring programming and job opportunities to the needs of trauma survivors and people with disabling conditions, and provide linkages to ongoing supportive services.[54]

Additionally, providers can:[55]

- prepare participants for program engagement through activities that they do not consider stressful or overwhelming;
- research the workplace environment for PTSD or TBI triggers and seek accommodations;
- work with the Veteran to recognize triggers in the workplace and come up with plans to respond; and
- collaborate with Veterans Affairs service providers and other community stakeholders to leverage supportive services such as vocational rehabilitation, mental health services, substance use services, and medical care.

Help Veterans Transition to the Civilian Workforce
To help veterans transition to a civilian work culture and capitalize on military work experience, providers can offer culturally sensitive options for acclimating to civilian work and help translate military ranks and duties to civilian positions and tasks. The following approaches may be beneficial to supporting this transition:

- ensure that all participants with a military background are carefully identified as some who served do not identify themselves as veterans;
- coach the participant on transferable skills from military experience such as team leadership, ability to meet pressure, initiative, and problem-solving abilities;[56]
- seek employers who advertise preferred hiring for veterans as well as human resources personnel who are sympathetic to the needs of veterans; and
- explain your participants' abilities to the employer by matching military experience to comparable skills and positions in civilian sectors using tools such as the Military to Civilian Occupation Translator.[57]

Programs should also be sensitive to personal difficulties around integrating into civilian work. If the veteran has barriers that impede placement in preferred jobs that are comparable to military experience, programs can discuss with the participant how an entry-level position is a "stepping stone" in career advancement and then offer additional opportunities such as sector-based training.[58] Furthermore, programs can help veterans build trust, camaraderie, and self-esteem by deploying them in work crews similar to the tightly knit structure of "squads" or "platoons" integrated with peer mentoring.[59] Hiring program staff members who have served in the military may also be important in supporting the transition to civilian work. Staff with military experience may be able to relate through a common experience, culture, and terminology, in addition to experience navigating their own transition to civilian work.

Individuals with a Criminal Record and People Leaving Prison

Individuals with a criminal record and people leaving prison regularly cite unemployment as their greatest barrier to housing and recent state and multistate prison reentry studies show that employment is a key predictor of successful reentry to the community from incarceration. Those who work and earn more than their counterparts three months after release are less likely to recidivate even three years later.[60] Furthermore, a two year study of a Transitional Jobs program found that program participation had a significant impact on recidivism rates for individuals with a high risk for recidivism.[61]

Further Resources

- HUD Employment Services for People with Criminal Records Lecture
- Prisoner Reintegration Resources
- Record of Arrest and Prosecution
- Work Opportunity Tax Credit
- Federal Bonding Program

Individuals leaving prison commonly have low educational attainment, significant work history and skill gaps, and may face employer discrimination that often comes with a criminal record, which can be intensified because a felony conviction increases the likelihood of being barred from employment in certain sectors.[62] Homelessness itself may lead to a criminal record as cities across the United States criminalize homelessness through sweeps and arrests of individuals living in public and those who panhandle.[63]

These individuals often face housing challenges due to limited incomes, bars on publicly assisted housing programs for individuals who have committed a sexual offense or produced methamphetamines in publically assisted housing, and broad discretion to screen individuals by public housing authorities. In addition, parole officers may expect individuals leaving prison to take a job even if it is far from a housing opportunity, making the relationship between work, housing, and transportation difficult.[64] Likewise, some parole officers may expect parolees to find work quickly, even if it is of low quality or poses triggers to recidivism.

Individuals with criminal records and people recently released from prison can be eager to begin employment, reconnect with their communities, and begin their lives anew. To best help individuals with criminal records and people leaving prison find and keep a job, programs need to help participants navigate legal obstacles, tailor job search activities and consider employer incentives, and provide follow-along supports. Because many individuals with criminal records and people leaving prison may also have substance use issues they may benefit from strategies to address substance use.[65]

Help Individuals with Criminal Records Navigate Legal Obstacles to Work
Providing linkages to legal services is commonly cited as one of the essential first steps to serving individuals with criminal backgrounds. Providers may want to attain a copy of the participant's Record of Arrest and Prosecution (the summary of a criminal record provided by the Federal Bureau of Investigation) to determine what information the employer can access, to correct any mistakes, and determine if any sectors or businesses are barred or less likely to hire as a result of particular offenses.[66] Even when an individual has not been convicted of a crime, employers

sometimes learn about criminal charges and arrest histories in background checks and that would be good for the job seeker and program to know what the employer may see beforehand. Child support obligations and parole requirements can pose challenges with program participation and securing employment if not jointly addressed by the employment program and local or state agencies or officers.[67] Legal services and advocacy can help mitigate these barriers through the following actions:[68]

- advocate to expunge a participant's criminal record if not found guilty;
- advocate to seal a participant's criminal record to avoid employer discrimination;
- help a participant obtain a Certificate of Rehabilitation – this certification removes sectoral bars on employment that sometimes come with a criminal record and may serve as evidence of personal change to the employer;
- advocate with child support courts to set realistic monthly payments that do not pose a disincentive to legitimate work;[69] and
- link to housing options for individuals with criminal records if they are ineligible for housing programs.[70]

Linking to housing options is important as individuals with criminal records are sometimes ineligible for housing programs and people leaving incarceration do not technically meet the federal definition of homelessness. For example, the Legal and Workforce Services (LAWS) program at Rubicon Programs in Richmond, California helps participants expunge or seal criminal convictions on their record, and resolve legal disputes with current or former landlords to help individuals remove legal barriers to employment and housing. The Michael Barlow Center of St. Leonard's Ministries in Chicago helps overcome employment barriers such as housing access by providing work readiness and occupational skills training to men and women living in the St. Leonard's residential programs.

Facilitate Support from Criminal Justice System Personnel
Building a relationship with the parole officer is commonly considered one of the first steps to serving individuals recently released from prison or otherwise on parole. Programs may need to work with the parole officer to ensure that participants are able to successfully participate in the employment program while meeting all the requirements of a conditional release.
For example, St. Patrick Center's Prisoner Re-entry program in St. Louis, Missouri brings together program partners including state and federal probation and parole officers to work in a co-located setting. Program staff members meet with parole officers and other stakeholders weekly and monthly to coordinate efforts to support each participant, and keep constant communication on participant issues and successes.

Furthermore, some parole officers may be flexible in coordinating the participant's terms of release, but it is important for the program to follow the parole officer's lead in helping the participant meet the conditions of release. Programs should actively communicate with the parole officer and work with the parole officer and participant to set clear expectations. For example, programs should set a clear process for site visits by the parole officer to ensure the reliability of the relationship and to safeguard against on-site conflicts or embarrassment for participants. These relationships may take time to build and require understanding and collaboration between criminal justice officials and employment program staff.[71]

Criminal justice system officials such as parole officers should also be brought into the mix of social support if the participant has exited prison. A recent study found that that a positive relationship between supportive judges and people arrested for drug charges yields strong declines in recidivism. Participants reported that these judges knew their cases, names, situations, and needs, were approachable, trustworthy, respectful, and fair, emphasized the importance of treatment, and gave them the chance to tell their side of the story.[72]

Provide Tailored Job Search Support and Employer Incentives
Job search support can help participants navigate concerns in the application and interviewing process. Jobseekers should be encouraged to present themselves and their past convictions with openness and honesty. Resumes may include significant work history gaps, so participants might be encouraged to list their experience by theme rather than chronology. Furthermore, participants should be coached to emphasize strengths in a job interview, explain what the employer is legally entitled to know about a criminal record, and identify positive steps for change.[73]

An employer reference and recent work history are lacking for many individuals with criminal records and certainly for those just released from prison. An employer reference and recent work history are highly valued by most employers and may provide a significant edge in attaining future employment.[74] Programs can help participants gain an employer reference and recent work history through internships, volunteering, a temporary staffing position, or a transitional job.

Financial incentives and protection may encourage employers and especially small to medium-sized employers to hire. For example, providers may encourage employers to take advantage of tax incentives such as the [Work Opportunity Tax Credit](#) or subsidized property insurance under the [Federal Bonding Program](#) which covers any risk of property damage.[75] It may be especially useful to highlight the employment program's value when offering access to incentives such as these. While financial incentives may be attractive on their own, employers may view them more favorably in conjunction with program support such as participant screening, drug testing, training, and retention support.[76]

Implement a Range of Job Retention Supports
To help individuals with a criminal record keep a job, retention services with close follow-up can prevent recidivism and promote successful employment. Staff should monitor participants for signs that may indicate the individual is no longer working or considering not working such as losing contact with the participant or participant expressions of serious concerns or dislikes about the workplace. If the participant does not maintain contact with the program, staff may consider reaching out to any close peers, family members, or parole officers involved with the program for a progress report.[77]

Retention bonuses are financial subsidies given to participants who continue holding unsubsidized employment. Research suggests that retention bonuses are a promising way to help keep participants engaged in follow-along support and may provide an incentive to maintaining employment.[78]

Peer mentoring is a best practice shown to increase program retention, job retention, and placement while reducing recidivism. Peer mentoring is most promising when started before release from prison and can help the participant readjust to life outside of incarceration, maintain accountability, focus on the "big picture," and make wise choices in navigating reentry. Peer mentoring can be offered in one-on-one arrangements, in groups, or through a combination of both. To secure the best possible mentoring relationship providers should:[80]

- select mentors who have successfully overcome adversity;
- screen volunteers to ensure that they will not likely pose a threat to the participant; and
- secure a signed agreement that defines the mentor's time commitment, number of mentorship trainings, and compliance with policies, procedures, confidentiality, and guidelines.

Individuals with Disabling Conditions and Health Issues

Individuals with disabling conditions such as substance use issues, mental illness, co-occurring issues, physical disabilities such as blindness, and chronic health issues such as HIV/AIDS often experience chronic homelessness, defined as a disabling condition coupled with a high frequency of homelessness or homelessness lasting more than one year.[81] Individuals experiencing chronic homelessness often face numerous barriers to employment and consume the greatest share of resources from emergency shelters, the criminal justice system, and public health systems of all the groups experiencing homelessness.[82]

Further Resources

- Ending Chronic Homelessness through Employment and Housing
- Common Employment Strategies to End Chronic Homelessness

Programs may need to be assessed and modified to meet the many different needs of individuals with chronic homelessness or disabling conditions. Likely important to all such individuals are streamlined access to permanent supportive housing, quality health care, and benefits counseling.

Provide Linkages to Permanent Supportive Housing
Permanent supportive housing is an evidence-based model of housing assistance which provides long-term housing integrated with supportive services for individuals experiencing chronic homelessness with issues including serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, substance use issues such as cocaine addiction, physical disabilities such as blindness, or chronic illnesses such as HIV/AIDS.[83] In permanent supportive housing, providers engage participants in the community to enter low-obligation housing for as long as they need it and then engage them to select supportive service options that meet their individual needs.[84]

Provide Linkages to Health Care
Health care services are a core resource for individuals experiencing chronic homelessness or disabling condition. These populations often have especially high need for health care and hygienic services. To help meet basic needs and the general hygiene requirements of employment, programs should refer participants with health and hygiene issues to a local community clinic or Veterans Affairs medical center for assessment and treatment. Dental care, screening and treatment for chronic health conditions such as tuberculosis and HIV, and mental health screening are especially important for individuals living in the most extreme circumstances.[85]

Provide Access to Benefits Counseling
Benefits counseling is critical for individuals with disabling conditions who hold concerns that working will reduce or eliminate their eligibility for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). Benefits counseling may help individuals learn about safe options for improving self-sufficiency such as the Plan for Achieving Self Support (PASS) and the Ticket to Work and Self Sufficiency (TTW) programs. PASS allows SSI/SSDI recipients to earn

> **Further Resources**
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> • Plan for Achieving Self Support
> • Ticket to Work and Self Sufficiency

money and benefits to achieve self-sufficiency and eventually leave benefits altogether.[86] Ticket to Work allows for similar provisions, but additionally establishes funding for public or private Employment Networks to provide tailored employment services in coordination with a State Vocational Rehabilitation agency.[87]

Individuals with Physical Disabilities

Individuals with physical disabilities such as impaired motor function or blindness have difficulty accessing worksites or performing specific tasks. Individuals with physical disabilities have individual strengths, such as attention to detail, and can express them through employment opportunities that accommodate their needs. In addition to benefits counseling and access to vocational rehabilitation services, individuals with physical disabilities may require accommodation in both

> **Further Resources**
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> • Office of Disability Employment Policy Technical Assistance
> • Job Accommodation Network
> • Telework Enhancement Act

the employment program and the workplace. With this in mind, staff should work with them to achieve their employment goals at their own pace.[88]

Ensure Program Facility Access
Tailoring program sites to individual needs is a best practice for all individuals with disabling conditions and is especially relevant to people with physical disabilities such as impaired motor function or blindness. Programs may need to redesign program entrances and facilities to accommodate for special needs (e.g. equipping wheel-chair ramps), allow the participant extra

time to physically move and progress in the program at their own speed, and encourage care partners such as family members to join in activities. For individuals in wheelchairs, staff should speak at eye level to build rapport and trust.[89]

Ensure Worksite Access and Propriety
Tailoring worksites to individual needs is especially relevant for individuals with disabling conditions and may be accomplished by requesting reasonable accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Examples of accommodations include making facilities accessible, modifying work scheduling or equipment, changing workplace policies, providing qualified readers, and offering work-from-home options. Additionally, Customized Employment strategies show promise such as job carving or "telework" accommodations for public workers such as working from home by computer under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010.[90]

People Living with HIV/AIDS

People living with HIV/AIDS face a disproportionately high rate of homelessness and up to 50 percent are at risk of experiencing homelessness. While many individuals living with HIV/AIDS successfully work and live in communities, high health care costs can place severe financial burdens on individuals with HIV/AIDS. Individuals may face barriers to employment including employer discrimination, lack of awareness about their potential to carry on productive lives after becoming HIV positive, fear that employment may jeopardize health or benefits, and lack of knowledge about employment options.[91]

Further Resources

Please visit the National Working Positive Coalition to learn more.

Most people living with HIV/AIDS lead healthy and productive work lives. Individuals living with HIV/AIDS and homelessness can become engaged in employment when they realize the life they can lead. Helping people living with HIV/AIDS find and keep employment involves educating participants on their value, assisting with anti-discrimination efforts, and helping participants navigate the demands of both work and health.

Educate People Living with HIV/AIDS on Their Employment Options
To help people living with HIV/AIDS find and keep a job, providers should focus efforts on educating participants about employment options. Programs should:[92]

- educate participants that individuals with HIV/AIDS can do successful, meaningful work,
- coach participants on navigating disclosure and confidentiality with a focus on what health related questions employers may legally ask and how to talk about their health if they choose to do so,[93] and
- counsel participants on options for retaining benefits while working.

Help People Living with HIV/AIDS Navigate Work and Health

To help participants manage work and health responsibilities, providers can help participants attain a work position that matches their individual health needs and provide integrated linkages to quality health care, supportive housing, benefits planning, and vocational rehabilitation services.[94] In the employment program, staff members should:

- ensure that a job placement does not pose obvious, serious risks to the participant given their level of physical health;[95]
- coach participants on navigating the use of leave time and taking medications on the job;[96]
- provide access to workplace accommodations and customized options such as "teleworking"[97] from home on a computer; and
- offer low-demand volunteer options for those who want to work but cannot work regularly.

Individuals with Mental Health Issues

Individuals with mental health issues experiencing homelessness face some of the most significant barriers to sufficient housing and employment including psychosis, anxiety issues, and depression, and are disproportionately represented among those experiencing chronic homelessness. While living on the street or in unstable housing, an individual's health problems such as mental illness are likely to worsen.[98] Although a majority of individuals experiencing mental illness acknowledge a need to work, and many do in fact work, some may struggle with low functioning on the job, experience employer discrimination, or avoid work for fear of losing SSI/SSDI benefits. Certain mental health issues can greatly limit an individual's workplace productivity, and co-occurrence with physical problems or substance use issues can lead to even weaker workplace performance.[99]

Further Resources

- Work as a Priority Guide
- Supported Employment Evidence-Based Practices Kit

At the same time, research finds that there is not a significant difference in employment outcomes for individuals with different levels and types of severe mental health issues when engaged in evidence-based supported employment. Individuals with mental health issues experiencing homelessness often want to work and have proven that they can meet their employment goals even when faced with significant barriers. In addition work can have a positive impact on their health which is a positive motivator.[100]

Provide Evidence-Based Employment Services

The Individual Placement Support (IPS) model of supported employment is an evidence-based approach for helping individuals with mental health issues enter employment in the competitive labor market integrated with treatment and other supportive services. Based on a synthesis of evaluation studies and other research, the IPS model isolates what works for serving individuals with a mental health issue. Here programs should:[102]

- work one-on-one with the participant to assess interests, barriers, and strengths,
- develop an individualized employment plan,

- counsel on benefits to overcome economic disincentives,
- support the participant's rapid job search and placement in paid community-based positions they desire,
- offer ongoing vocational supports such as one-on-one job coaching and on-the-job training and credentialing,
- integrate employment assistance with mental health treatment and other supportive services to better help the individual work through employment barriers, and
- continually reassess the participant and provide additional support or re-placement as new barriers emerge.

Because individuals with mental health issues often face substance use issues, addiction treatment and employment modifications are frequently needed as well.[103]

Individuals with Substance Use Issues

Some individuals experiencing homelessness face substance use issues that interfere with daily life and they are less likely to work. Even when these individuals do work, their earnings are commonly low. Individuals with substance use issues often experience unemployment because of weak or inconsistent work and educational histories, behavioral issues, and impaired performance. Functioning may decline even more when substance use issues co-occur with psychiatric issues or chronic illness. Substance use issues commonly result in an individual having both weak social ties and a criminal record, two of the strongest barriers to employment for this population.[105]

Considering these barriers to employment, program providers should consider how they play a role in mitigating the effects of substance use on and off the job. Programs may integrate their 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.

Integrate Employment with a Treatment Regimen
Integrating employment services with addiction treatment can help individuals with a substance use issue increase work performance, and building employment into a treatment regimen can help participants maintain progress.[106] For example, Central City Concern (a multi-service health care, housing, and service organization) in Portland, Oregon transitions individuals with substance use issues from detoxification to transitional housing coupled with ongoing treatment, supportive service linkages, and access to IPS supported employment opportunities.[107]

Some programs use drug testing both to foster a sense of accountability with the program and to introduce participants to real employment expectations. For example, The Doe Fund in New York City mandates twice weekly random on-site drug tests in their abstinence-based Transitional Jobs program to monitor participants and address relapse.[108] Conversely, programs such as Central City Concern in Portland, Oregon and Inspiration Corporation in Chicago, Illinois may use harm reduction strategies that seek to minimize the negative effects of substance use, limit substance use, and finally move toward abstinence. Based on participants' desire

to change, staff members may use a harm reduction approach by coaching participants to avoid substance use on the job and limit use to weekends so as to mitigate negative effects on performance.[109]

Help Individuals with Substance Use Issues Manage Triggers and Relapse
Once participants have been placed in a job, programs should keep in touch with them to ensure that the workplace environment does not raise hidden psychological triggers for relapse such as stressful or long commutes, workplace conflict, poorly defined tasks, overwhelming work, and unexpected worksite changes. Plans should be made with participants for how to handle their first paycheck as they may be tempted to use new resources to feed old habits. If participants relapse, it is important to remind them of their goals, point to the inconsistency, frame relapse as a learning experience, remind them of past successes, and provide empathy to help them overcome shame.[110] Customizing the job position to accommodate further treatment and avoid triggers is one useful strategy. Programs may also use harm reduction strategies to minimize the negative effects of substance use on work performance. If a specific job is not a good fit, the participant should be placed in a new position that better meets their needs.

Conclusion

Numerous strategies have emerged for tailoring employment services to address barriers, needs, and strengths of people in specific homeless populations. Providers should consider these approaches in designing programs, training staff, and collaborating locally to ensure a continuum of services relevant to the needs of these populations. Policymakers and other stakeholders should consider the importance of flexible tailored services that meet the needs of diverse individuals and populations in plans to end homelessness and in funding workforce programs. People experiencing or at risk of homelessness have diverse needs, strengths, and interests – **leveraging a toolkit of population-based service strategies is critical to supporting employment success for each individual.**

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

- Employment Program Models for People Experiencing Homelessness: Different approaches to program structure

- Employment Program Components: Considerations for designing programming for people experiencing homelessness

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