

Employment

When asked what they most want, most consumers of mental health services will say “A Job and a secure, safe place to live” in that order. Gainful employment is an integral component of recovery. It has been shown to increase self esteem and lead to better symptom control. Most patients with serious mental illness want to work in competitive employment if they can keep insurance coverage for their health benefits.

There is more than one model for obtaining work. Traditional vocational rehabilitation programs have generally failed to increase their rate of competitive employment because consumers tend to become stalled in prevocational experiences and never move on to gainful employment. Some employment programs have been around for many years while some are newer approaches. More recently these models have been studied and the one that stands out as the most successful is supported employment. The following is a brief description of three programs.

Supported Employment: Supported Employment attempts to put out patients to work early with immediate competitive job searching. This is accompanied by ongoing support. Vocational rehabilitation is included in this program and not separate as in other approaches. . Research has shown Supported Employment to be superior to other programs such as rehabilitation day treatment programs that focus on job training and rehabilitation before the individual actually seeks employment. Supported Employment is considered to be a best practice in the treatment of people with Serious Mental Illness. As many as 40% - 60% of patients in Supported Employment are able to obtain and maintain competitive work up to 18 months after they enter a program.

The following is a description of the elements that make up Supported Employment.

1. **Competitive employment:** This is different from sheltered jobs created especially for people with disabilities where the expectations are low. The only requirement for Supported Employment is a strong desire to work. Mainstream jobs are sought in the community for at least minimum wage working along side people who are not disabled.
2. **Rapid job search:** Pre-employment assessment training and assessment are not done. Employment assessment can occur after a competitive job is secured. Individuals usually find jobs in the first 3 months of entering the program. Those without a high school diploma are urged to enroll in a G.E.D. program because only 56% of adults without a high school diploma are in employment; Adults without a diploma earn 65% of what people who have high school degrees make. [Study by organization for Economic Cooperation and Development]. Further, the OECD study shows that an adult with a university degree in the U.S. earns on average 72 percent more than someone with a high school degree.

3. **Integration of mental health:** Mental health and rehabilitation are combined and not viewed as separate programs. The staff is usually integrated into a team that can address all aspects of treatment. In this model Job Failures are seen as experiences for learning. Risk has dignity.
4. **Patient preference:** Patients seek their choice of jobs rather than pick from choices that might be made by staff members. Individual strengths and choice are cornerstones of supported employment programs.
5. **Continuous evaluation:** This evaluates the skill of the employees as they perform the job. Individuals may start with volunteer jobs, and then progress to part time jobs to assess their strengths and needs. Supported employment is not just getting a job; it is getting the next job, and the job after that, and the job after that. Career planning is the most effective strategy for creating a long term attachment to the labor force.
6. **Ongoing support:** This is continuous and is tailored to meet the individual's needs. This support is usually provided by team members. Some support is necessary to keep a job after getting a job. Peer Support Groups with other individuals who have started working have been also shown to be helpful.
7. **Supported Employment is Recovery Oriented.** Employment Supporters need to say Yes to this question: Are we viewing and treating this person (according him or her the same rights and responsibilities) as a "normal" individual who is doing his or her best to deal with a particular set of challenges? Does this person gain power, purpose (valued roles), competence (skills), and/or connections (to others) as a result of this interaction?

Two other models of employment assistance are the Clubhouse Model and day treatment models.

Psychosocial Rehabilitation, the Club house model: This was first introduced at Fountain House in New York and is usually referred to as the club house model. The club house model focuses on gainful employment but with a slightly different focus. Club houses are member run but have a strong emphasis on job placement. Patients may be in 'training' before they actually start working. This is accomplished by working in units in the club house itself on such tasks as meal preparation, banking activities (Fountain house actually has its own bank), and other units. Most recently club houses have also focused on education. The goal is to eventually place the member in a temporary job where the individual is in training with a support staff worker who shares the job with them. Eventually the clubhouse member is expected to find outside competitive employment. This mode of employment preparation appears to be less successful than supported employment. While the Clubhouse Model is a Psychosocial Rehabilitation model, the latest thinking of psychosocial rehabilitation is that it is better to place, then train on a job.

Day Treatment, Sheltered Workshops, etc: These programs generally focus on pre-employment training, evaluation, sheltered work, and skill building. Unfortunately, these programs have not been shown to improve the rate of competitive employment. Individuals have found these programs to be nonproductive and have not completed these programs or they found themselves performing the same routine over and over, thus becoming discouraged and dropping out.

Working and Maintaining Benefits

Free Benefits Planning, Assistance and Outreach services are available to people with disabilities who receive either Supplemental Security Income (SSI) , Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or both, and who are aged 14 to 65.

For Davidson County the Benefits Specialist is located at Easter Seals UCP of North Carolina in Greensboro.

336-272-9602 Pat Davis and Brenda Love

Cabarrus, Rowan, Stanly, and Union Counties are covered by the Social Security Benefits Specialist in Charlotte

Lisa Oakley at 704-844-8038.

Other sources of Benefits Specialists are Life Plan Trusts, Vocational Rehabilitation offices, Tri County Industries and Easter Seals UCP offices.

General Guidelines:

Adults can earn \$27,908 and keep Medicaid without a deductible.

Earnings can be adjusted by what are called IRWE's such as employment services, mileage, and a driver if individual can't drive.

Under the Student Income Exclusion, a child under 22, not married, can exclude \$5,910 a year, usually in a summer job.

To keep Medicaid, the individual must have received \$1 in benefits in the month prior because of earnings from a job.

Individuals can continue to be gainfully employed for three years before their disability is questioned. If staying on medication is essential to staying on the job, the disability is usually still supported. Other programs offered by social security are the PASS plan for an individual with a job who wants to set aside some of his/her earnings for a job objective such as buying a van for a cleaning crew service or buying photographic equipment to become a professional photographer. People who work past the 3 years of gainful competitive employment can file for 1619B, pay for Medicaid coverage and

continue to make up to \$70,000 a year. If something happens to their ability to work, they automatically go back on Medicaid and SSI without a coverage gap.

Don't let anyone tell you that you don't want to work because you will lose your benefits. Get job. Then get benefits counseling.