



NATIONAL COALITION *for* HOMELESS VETERANS

Recognizing Work as a Priority in Preventing or Ending Homelessness

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Quick Takeaways

- Rapid access to jobs, “no wrong door to employment,” improves long-term stability of homeless individuals.
- Job training and employment programs work best for homeless people when they are combined with supportive services and housing.
- Provide jobs that include flexible readiness criteria, schedules, and tasks that can engage homeless job seekers who want to work quickly and may help them shun lengthy work preparation programs.
- Continua of Care plans and Ten-Year Plans to End Homelessness must include strategies to help homeless people meet their financial needs through income support programs and through employment and training services.
- Cross-training of staff develops practitioner alliances and increases the efficiency of programs in each system. Collaborations among diverse partners with diverse interests can leverage more in the way of resources, knowledge, and expertise than any one sector working alone.

Introduction

The recently adopted housing model – Housing First – posits that individuals will sustain greater long-term stability when one need is first taken care of – housing – and other services provided subsequent. This paper draws a parallel between this model and a new model of providing employment as a first-needs priority to help prevent and end homelessness, with special emphasis on those who are homeless with disabilities. Programs in Los Angeles and Indianapolis that illustrate these strategies are highlighted.

Collaboration Gap

While the authors recognize housing as a critical step in preventing and ending homeless among the chronically homeless, they argue this step alone is not enough to ensure long-term stability.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has recognized the need to integrate and coordinate employment services as part of a seamless array of services for homeless individuals with serious mental illness...Although Federal policies direct communities to seek dollars for employment from other mainstream programs (such as labor, mental health, and vocational rehabilitation), in most jurisdictions the cross-systems collaborations necessary for the funding shift to work are not in place. Continuum members often lack the experience they need to leverage service dollars from complex mainstream systems and may not know what funding is available. Knowledge dissemination and a proactive planning response are essential to avoid denying essential employment assistance to those least likely to access it through mainstream workforce services.

The authors emphasize employment as a means to contribute to housing stability. Research shows that with the appropriate blend of assessment, case management, employment, training, housing and support services, a substantial proportion of homeless individuals can secure and retain jobs and that this contributes to housing stability. One demonstration program found that providing rapid access to jobs was a more effective strategy to increase positive employment outcomes than requiring participation in extensive reemployment readiness services. Another SAMHSA-funded program – that targeted mentally ill homeless individuals – concluded that these clients are best served by placing as great an emphasis on providing employment services as on providing housing and clinical treatment.

Outreach

The report also provides effective strategies and approaches for dealing with homeless individuals who may be unaware of mainstream employment resources or resistant to formalized services. These include:

- creating a welcoming environment in which individuals can explore or discuss employment services “with no strings attached,”
- meeting with individuals on their “turf” – park benches, under bridges, wherever they live – to have nonjudgmental conversations about a working life, and
- arranging a visit to an employment program in which the individual can talk with staff or peers about what the program does and how it helps people who are homeless.

Outreach can include having job postings available at drop-in centers, regular coffee-time conversations with employment specialists, or opportunities to hear from peers who have found employment about how work has helped them lead more satisfying lives. These methods should not require prerequisites.

Staff training provides another way to improve employment outcomes for the chronically homeless. Creating a more effective team approach can improve services through cross-training staff in mental health and employment issues, creating protocols for communication among team members, and providing opportunities for team planning. Additionally, establishing an in-house peer advisory committee with real authority to make decisions about employment services could help provide opportunities for homeless persons to be a part of the solution, creating a sense of ownership.

The authors also seek to challenge some of the traditional assumptions about work.

A homeless person’s work skills are not only those that are indicated on their work history and resume but also those they use to survive on the streets. People who are homeless are resilient and creative in finding sources of income. They may not report to an office at 8 AM every day, but they do adhere to their own “work schedules.” They know where to be and for how long if they are to make the maximum amount of money from panhandling. They have their own “business territories.” Their ability to survive in their own “workplaces” should be acknowledged.

Conclusion

Lessons from the demonstration programs highlight that job training and employment programs work best for homeless people when they are combined with supportive services and housing. Furthermore, these programs demonstrate the importance of rapid access to jobs, grounded in the principle that there is no wrong door to employment.

This approach is consistent with the key evidence-based Supported Employment principles that lead to better employment outcomes such as “zero exclusion” (people are not precluded from participation based upon severity of disability) “rapid access to competitive jobs” (getting people into real work for real pay quickly) and “time-unlimited services for job retention, continuous assessment and advancement” (ongoing support to maintain and advance in the job for as long as needed).

Evidence gathered on the “Housing First” model demonstrates that people are more likely to keep housing (and develop motivation to address their treatment and rehabilitation needs) when housing is provided with no strings or prerequisites attached. Similarly, experience in employment and training programs that target homeless job seekers is starting to show that offering work at the earliest opportunity when people ask for help motivates people who are chronically homeless to seek connections with service providers and address treatment issues.