



Research Brief



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Targeting Employment and Job Retention for Individuals who are Homeless

Despite a growing and increasingly more diverse network of homeless services, the number of homeless individuals in Boston, and across the nation, has increased dramatically over the past decade. The National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients (1999) estimates that between 2.5 and 3 million individuals are homeless.

Existence for an individual who is homeless is one of isolation from mainstream America with/and a lack of access to housing, to meaningful jobs, to adequate health care, and to connections with friends and families. The individual who is homeless is subject to violence and criminal activity and lacks meaningful connection with community. In addition, homelessness all too often occurs in combination with chronic mental illness, alcoholism, substance abuse and addiction, AIDS/HIV, or other chronic and disabling illnesses or disabilities.

Considering the problems of chronic poor health, low job skills, limited experience, poor education, troubles with the law, the stereotypes, social stigma, and low self-esteem associated with homelessness and disability, obtaining quality employment and earning a living wage is often a seemingly unattainable goal for an individual who is homeless. A national study found that obtaining employment was a primary need for the individual who was homeless, and cited lack of employment as the single most important factor in maintaining homelessness (Burt, et al., 1999). Despite the employment barriers that homeless people face, few programs have been developed to help homeless people to access and keep jobs. One federal housing demonstration program report for the homeless (Westat, 1995) found that employment-related services were the most frequently cited unmet need.

Positive Signs. Although more research has been conducted on housing, shelter, and health care programs for the homeless than on employment, recent efforts have demonstrated promise about employment outcomes and job success.

- A JTHDP final report summarized over 60 programs working with over 45,000 individuals nationally during the 1990s. Thirty percent of the participants were able to obtain employment with over 50 percent employed after 13 weeks. No report of the incidence or type of disabilities was noted and no long-term information is available.
- An Oregon program utilized strong business partnerships with the construction industry and emphasized multiple and coordinated services. An estimated 87 percent completed the program and over 80 percent of those obtained employment. Again, no strong follow up information was available.

A consistent result of several studies focusing on employment or job training is that:

- Employment services must be coordinated with other homeless services, especially for individuals who are homeless with a disability.

- Traditional approaches to job training and placement are inadequate, due in part to the emphasis on short-term outcomes, lack of long-term support, lack of service coordination during and after placement, and lack of follow-up.
- Lack of attention to physical health, ongoing substance abuse, or mental health problems results in loss of jobs.

Project Independence is a longitudinal employment program coordinated by Community Work Services, Inc. that is part of the City of Boston's "Continuum of Care" system for hard-to-place homeless persons with severe disabilities, substance abuse, and/or criminal histories. The program is funded through a grant from the US Department of HUD under the McKinney program and provides vocational assessment and counseling, job training, paid work experience, job placement assistance, and post-employment follow-up services. Since 1997, ***Project Independence*** has provided services to approximately 337 homeless adults ranging in age from 18 to 61, all with disabilities, with 75 percent having positive CORI checks. At the time of the last evaluation 166 individuals were placed in competitive employment and 93 percent of those placed had secured permanent housing. A benefit of the program is economic and personal stabilization.

Significant findings from this project to date that are important to housing agencies, shelters, service providers, and policy makers include the following:

- There has been an increase in the number of homeless women, especially younger women with no work history, referred for employment services.
- Once an individual is referred for services, immediate attention to develop an employment plan, and rapid placement into paid training or trial work, is related to ongoing success.
- Success in employment training is equated with minimally two months of clean and sober behavior and a preference of four months sobriety. Success appears to correlate positively with duration of sobriety prior to entering the program.
- Job training, paid trial work, and placement into competitive employment must be coordinated with permanent housing activities.
- Case management related to housing, transportation, health monitoring, financial management, substance abuse, and employer support is critical to short and long term employment success.
- Employment outcomes can be achieved, but attention to the job retention strategies must be addressed, with duration and intensity of follow-up being a significant factor.
- Employment resources such as One-Stop Career Centers do not have the resources to provide job development or training for individuals who are homeless.
- Corrections Services appear to consider the shelter care system as an appropriate discharge vehicle.
- 90 days is not an acceptable follow up period...significant events appear to occur after 120 days that impact sustained employment.
- Positive CORI reports are a significant barrier to employment.

Perhaps the most significant finding from the past seven years is that individuals who are homeless are able to benefit from employment services, overcome chronic unemployment, achieve competitive and successful employment, and become taxpayers. However, while many individuals are able to achieve employment, many individuals experience difficulty, or lack ongoing resources, or workplace supports, and lose their job. Research is needed to objectively describe the varied and complex factors, dimensions, and predictors of successful and sustained employment, as well as the "why" and "how" people with significant disabilities who are homeless are able to overcome chronic unemployment and achieve successful and sustained employment.