



Employment Services in Supportive Housing

Overview

Work has obvious value in promoting housing stability and improving the quality of tenants' lives. In addition to helping tenants to increase their income, employment also plays a critical role in helping tenants to build their self-esteem, social support networks, and knowledge and skills. Supportive housing projects should include employment services as part of the package of services available to tenants. This document focuses on the major areas to be considered in developing effective employment services for tenants that result in jobs and career advancement.

Defining Goals and Expectations

Before embarking on the provision of employment services, providers should carefully consider what they hope to achieve and how they will define success for themselves and tenants. Depending on tenants' needs, the length of time required to achieve employment goals varies greatly. Goals should be achievable, realistic, and appropriate for the participants. Structuring the employment services so as to develop skills, confidence, and progress toward career plans helps build staff and tenant motivation. Although individuals participating in employment services often obtain and keep jobs, full-time employment may not be a practical goal for everyone. In designing the employment services, it is critical to identify jobs that tenants will want and be able to do.

Individual employment paths usually consist of a series of outcomes that can be used to monitor progress, including:

- Working part time
- Increasing hourly wage or total income
- Retaining employment over a period of time
- Developing new skills

Developing a Range of Employment Services

Supportive housing can provide numerous opportunities to help tenants become employed and/or advance in their careers. Efforts can range from individualized counseling and support to creating in-house employment opportunities.

Vocational Support Services

Vocational support services increase motivation and provide the extra assistance that an individual may need to get and keep a job. This includes practical services that are provided as needed, before and after an individual enters the workforce. These services should be designed to help individuals achieve success in moving toward their employment goals and career objectives.

Examples of vocational support services include:

- Helping to generate and sustain the motivation to become employed
- Assisting in developing a resume and completing job applications
- Helping to prepare for a job interview
- Planning how to respond to questions and issues regarding disclosure of a disability
- Offering pre- and post-employment support groups
- Developing individual career plans
- Discussing entitlements, health insurance and rent subsidy issues
- Arranging for English as a Second Language (ESL) classes
- Discussing attire and grooming



- Recognizing successes
- Supporting people through setbacks

Managing the Transition to Work

If an individual has never worked or has been absent from the workforce for an extended time, he/she may face significant challenges in transitioning to the role of an employee. Assistance and support in managing this transition are often needed. Many tenants in their 30s, 40s or 50s, for example, are in the position of considering entry-level jobs. This can raise issues about self-esteem because these jobs might not match their expectations. For some individuals, doing entry-level work may be frustrating and leave them feeling undervalued. Discussions about expectations, concerns and feelings as well as assistance in identifying achievable goals and developing a career plan are important in facilitating the transition.

Career Counseling

Since individual career plans can change as a result of experience and motivation, periodic discussions about the future and career path are important. Career counseling includes an assessment of interests, motivations, skills, capabilities, education, job training and work history. The career counseling process should produce a career plan, which lists specific employment goals and tasks required to achieve them. The plan should give participants a clear starting point on the path to advancement. Additionally, plans identify education and skills needed, as well as the types of support necessary to access and maintain employment. Staff should point out areas of past experience that demonstrate skills and strengths that can be transferable to the workplace, such as navigating the bureaucracies of public entitlements systems.

If applicable, it is particularly important that the career planning process also include discussions about self-disclosure of personal information, such as a psychiatric disability, to colleagues and supervisors. In some cases, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) will apply, and people should be informed about the accommodations available and the best processes for obtaining them.

Finding and Developing Employment Opportunities

Finding employment opportunities is the responsibility of both tenants and staff. Searching the want ads and making “cold calls” are often effective, and finding a job may occur with or without assistance from the staff. The staff can maintain job vacancy bulletin boards and help tenants follow up on specific job leads and searches. Transportation funds, a clothing allowance, or other short-term funds also can support individuals in their efforts. Staff also can engage in strategic job-development efforts with employers, cultivating linkages with local businesses and retail chains, and serving as a broker when mutual interests align.

Some organizations create industry-specific training programs that focus on the development of labor pools for specific industries and corporations. By tapping into employment and economic trends (such as growth in the hospitality industry), for instance, enterprising organizations can create partnerships with local and national businesses, matching training to very specific employment needs. Industry-specific programs allow planning for specific types of jobs and for orientation of trainees to specific job markets.

While there are many advantages to having the interdependence of employers and job-training programs within industry-specific arrangements, these relationships also can force employment service providers and the individuals they serve into a narrow set of opportunities. Some tenants may not be interested in or eligible for industry-specific training and, therefore, will not participate. Alternatively, organizations that attempt to develop hand-picked job opportunities may lose in efficiency and predictability but gain in other ways, such as higher participant satisfaction and job stability. Brokering jobs that have appeal and offer a living wage with benefits is a sophisticated and labor-intensive responsibility. Having a job developer on staff to focus on locating viable employment opportunities is clearly an advantage for building a job bank and for keeping a program current and effective. A job developer also sustains connections with employers and establishes a track record of good referrals.

Just Let Me Work!

Long-term classroom training, prolonged assessments and other prerequisites to getting a job can discourage some people. Individuals often learn more about themselves and necessary training and skills by entering the work force. Additionally, getting paid and having the satisfaction of holding a job are often invaluable motivators for self-determination and advancement.

Social Entrepreneurial Ventures

Many supportive housing providers also are engaged in entrepreneurial ventures that provide revenue and real-world business environments that offer training and employment opportunities for tenants. One highly successful example, Rubicon Programs Incorporated in Richmond, California, has developed several nonprofit businesses, including Rubicon Bakery and Rubicon Buildings and Grounds, creating jobs for economically disadvantaged, disabled and formerly homeless people. Similarly, Rubicon Home Care Consortium trains public assistance recipients to become certified nurse assistants and home-care aides to serve frail, older adults and younger, disabled individuals.

Managing Entitlements and Public Benefits Issues

An understanding of income limits and the various reporting requirements regarding employment and public benefits/entitlements is important for all employment service providers. Though providers may leave the responsibility of reporting earned income with the tenant, it is important to help him/her work out any related issues concerning the impact of income on eligibility for benefit programs, such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Medicaid. Preferably, staff members will assist tenants in calculating the effect of earned income on benefits and inform tenants about any relevant changes.

Creating a Culture that Promotes Work

Creating a culture that promotes work begins with an environment in which employment is encouraged and expected. Specific strategies that have helped organizations establish a culture that promotes work include:

- Prioritizing the development of vocational and employment services in the overall design of the supportive housing services plan
- Focusing on employment early in the engagement process, such as inquiring about employment goals during housing intake interviews

- Arranging schedules so that the staff are available to tenants who work during the day
- Connecting tenants with resources such as computers, telephones, fax lines, desks, and transportation and clothing funds
- Celebrating employment-related milestones such as graduations and promotions