

# What is Supported Employment?

Research has shown that **Supported Employment** helps people with severe mental illness:

- Find and keep competitive jobs
- Achieve higher income levels
- Experience fewer symptoms of mental illness and episodes of hospitalization
- Have higher self-esteem
- Live more independently\*

Supported Employment helps people with severe mental illness find, get, and keep competitive employment positions in their communities.

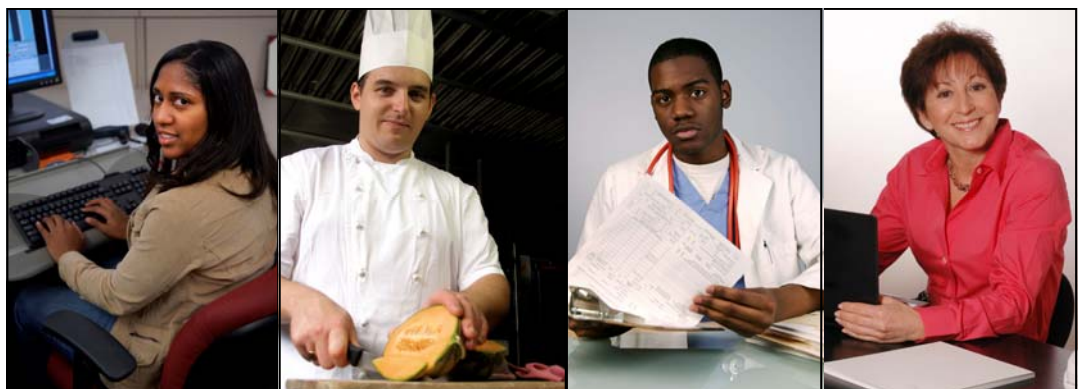
In this model, support is provided by Employment Specialists who can help a person in many ways, depending on the unique preferences and needs of the individual. For instance, a Supported Employment Specialist can help someone:

- Identify job preferences and goals
- Find competitive employment positions that meet their job preferences and goals
- Complete job applications and prepare for interviews
- Determine how wages may affect cash and medical benefits (e.g. SSI, SSDI, Medical Assistance, and Medicare) through benefits counseling
- Figure out transportation options to travel to and from work
- Develop and work on long-term career plans

- Learn communication and socialization skills to build healthy relationships with supervisors, co-workers and others

Evidence shows that individuals with serious mental illness want to work and can do well in competitive employment positions. Research also shows that individuals who receive services according to a Supported Employment model are more likely to be successful than if they receive other forms of vocational services.\* The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has identified Supported Employment as an evidence-based practice, and has developed a toolkit to support its adoption (see page 4).

This newsletter contains information about the seven principles of Supported Employment. It also contains information about the Allegheny County Office of Behavioral Health's perspective on this evidence-based practice, and resources to help you learn more about Supported Employment.



\* Ohio Supported Employment Coordinating Center of Excellence at Case Western Reserve University. *Supported Employment. The evidence-based practice: an overview. 2007.*

# The Seven Principles of Supported Employment

There are seven principles in the Supported Employment model. These principles are:

## **1. Eligibility for Supported Employment is based on the person's interest in working.**

Research has shown that an interest in employment is the best predictor of whether someone will be successful working. Therefore, anyone interested in working should have access to Supported Employment. This means people should be able to participate in Supported Employment regardless of their level of cognitive functioning or their diagnosis. The presence of symptoms, substance abuse issues, or lack of prior work experience also should not prevent someone from participating in Supported Employment.

## **2. Supported Employment is integrated with mental health treatment.**

By working with members of a person's treatment team, such as psychiatrists, therapists or case managers, Supported Employment providers can ensure a person's vocational goals are given high priority. Coordination of employment and treatment services means clinical issues that can have an impact on employment, such as medication side effects or persistent symptoms, are being addressed.

## **3. Competitive employment is the goal of Supported Employment.**

Supported Employment is geared toward helping people find and keep jobs in the community that pay at least minimum wage. Supported Employment is not intended to help people access sheltered workshop positions or placement into jobs that are specially "set-aside" for individuals with disabilities.

## **4. In the Supported Employment model, a job search starts soon after a person expresses an interest in working.**

Research has shown that people are less successful finding employment if their job search is delayed by completing pre-employment assessment or training. People are more successful and learn more about the type of job and community work setting they would like to pursue by exploring available competitive employment positions.

## **5. Supported Employment providers continue to help an individual as long as he or she wants assistance and support.**

People should be able to receive long-term support if they need it. However, most people find the need for support gradually decreases as they become more confident and independent while working.

## **6. Supported Employment is individualized.**

People are more likely to be successful in jobs that match their unique skills and preferences. Supported Employment helps people find and keep a specific job that matches their individual talents, instead of helping people obtain positions with a single employer or a single type of job. Also, the types of support a person receives, e.g. finding a job or working on socialization skills with co-workers, are tailored to the preferences of each person.

## **7. Supported Employment provides benefits counseling.**

Many people who are interested in working are worried they will lose their health insurance benefits or social security income if they work. Benefits counseling helps individuals understand their individual situations and connects them to programs that can help them maintain their benefits while working.

## Comparing the Supported Employment Model to Other Vocational Service Models

Supported Employment differs from other vocational service models in a number of ways. For example, other vocational services include approaches such as transitional employment, sheltered workshops, or vocational rehabilitation services requiring extensive pre-employment testing, training, or assessments. The table below details several of the differences between supported employment and other vocational models.

|                                 | Supported Employment   | Other Vocational Models   |
|---------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Employment focus</b>         | Competitive permanent positions in the community which pay at least minimum wage.  | May involve temporary positions or transitional employment positions specifically “set-aside” for individuals with disabilities or positions in sheltered workshops.                            |
| <b>Job search timeline</b>      | The focus is on rapid job search. Employment Specialists work with people to find and get jobs according to their preferences, with the goal of first contact with a potential employer within 30 days of entering a supported employment program. | May require completion of pre-employment activities such as standardized testing, work readiness assessments, or participation in non-competitive employment positions.                         |
| <b>Type of jobs</b>             | Supported Employment helps people find jobs that meet their unique preferences and talents. This results in people obtaining positions in a variety of fields.   | Depending on the type of vocational service, people may face limited options as to the types of positions that are available or be directed toward jobs set aside for people with disabilities. |
| <b>Level of support</b>         | Individualized to meet the needs of each person. Service is time-unlimited, meaning someone can receive support as long as he or she needs it.   | People may only be eligible to receive support for a certain length of time.  |
| <b>Eligibility for services</b> | People are not excluded because of the presence of mental illness symptoms, substance use, or lack of work history.  | People may have to meet certain eligibility requirements based on cognitive functioning or the absence of symptoms of mental illness.   |

**Research has shown that 58% of people who participate in Supported Employment reported significant gains in finding and keeping employment, compared to only 21% of people who received other vocational rehabilitation services.**

Bond, GR, Becker DR, Drake RE, et al: Implementing Supported Employment as an Evidence-Based Practice. *Psychiatric Services* 52:313-3222, 2001.

## Employment: A Key to Recovery

### *The Pennsylvania Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services Recognizes Employment as a Key to Recovery*

The Pennsylvania Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (OMHSAS) is committed to moving the state's recovery transformation forward. To do so, OMHSAS recognizes that "a person's recovery journey must include acquiring or returning to social roles in the community, including that of being a worker."\*

In 2008, OMHSAS released *A Call for Change: Employment, a Key to Recovery*. This document outlines the many positive outcomes associated with people with severe mental illness holding competitive employment positions. It also details the following goal: "To significantly increase the number of persons served by the behavioral health system who are competitively employed."

To achieve this goal, OMHSAS is working on three objectives:

- Increase funding and resources for competitive employment.
- Promote system and organization change in order to increase the use of the evidence-based practices

of Supported Employment and Supported Education and to address disincentives to work.

- Collect baseline data on individuals in the behavioral health system who are competitively employed, in order to track and reward system/provider improvements.

As part of this initiative, OMHSAS has instituted an Employment Outcomes Workgroup, composed of various stakeholders from around the state, including Allegheny County. The purpose of this workgroup is to encourage a renewed conversation at the county level, and between county mental health offices and provider agencies, about the importance of work and the need for an expansion of support for evidence-based employment programs and practices.

This workgroup will help OMHSAS determine a strategy for assessing how local system providers are doing in helping people with mental illness into the workforce.

\* Pennsylvania Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (OMHSAS). *A Call for Change: Employment, a Key to Recovery*. 2008.

## Supported Employment Resources

- **SAMHSA Supported Employment evidence-based practice toolkit:** Information for people who receive mental health services, family members, and providers of mental health services.  
<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/CommunitySupport/toolkits/employment/>
- **Ohio Supported Employment Coordinating Center of Excellence at Case Western Reserve University:** Information about research on Supported Employment outcomes, as well information about implementing Supported Employment and stories of people who have benefited from Supported Employment services.  
<http://www.ohioseccoe.case.edu/>
- **Dartmouth Supported Employment Center:** Information about measuring fidelity to the Supported Employment model.  
<http://dms.dartmouth.edu/dsec/>

**In Allegheny County during 2008, 36% of people with mental illness who were unemployed reported being dissatisfied with being unemployed.**

**Based on interviews conducted by the Consumer Action and Response Team (CART), as reported in the CART 2008 Annual Report.**

## Transforming Employment Services in Allegheny County

The Allegheny County Office of Behavioral Health (OBH) is committed to improving employment outcomes for people with serious mental illness. To accomplish this, OBH is working with a variety of stakeholders to make recommendations on system change to develop a long-range plan on employment and to serve in an advisory capacity on an ongoing basis.

Transformation of the mental health system involves:

- Improving access to employment services
- Integrating mental health services so that all programs have clear roles and responsibilities in promoting employment
- Improving the quality of Supported Employment programs by ensuring that all OBH-funded programs utilize SAMHSA Supported Employment evidence-based practices

While there is much the mental health system can do to improve employment outcomes for people with mental illnesses, OBH believes that working in isolation from other segments of the broader community will result in a limited impact on increasing the number of people who are employed.

To maximize the employment opportunities for people with mental illness, the mental health system must develop partnerships with the business community, institutions of higher education, training programs, foundations, workforce development organizations, and other social service organizations.

OBH has developed a long-range blueprint to address the goals of transformation and partnering. While the implementation of this plan will take place over a number of years, OBH believes the plan's comprehensive nature will increase employment opportunities and in turn improve the quality of life for people with mental illness.

*Contributed by Mike Gruber, System Transformation Coordinator, Allegheny County Office of Behavioral Health*



Transforming services to better support people with mental illness in getting competitive work involves changing existing employment services and building partnerships with other community organizations.

### Keys to Successful Implementation

The OBH plan to transform the mental health system to improve employment outcomes covers both the changes needed *within* the provider system and the need to build partnerships and collaborate with other organizations and stakeholders.

For providers changing to the Supported Employment model, building commitment from the organization's leaders to the direct staff is a key first step. This can be accomplished through sharing research findings and consulting with successful programs to address the perceptions that people with serious mental illness can't work, and will lose their benefits if they do. *Work is part of recovery, and therefore a part of clinical care.* Retraining staff to provide Supported Employment services is an ongoing process, and requires strong supervision, adequate resources, consumer outcomes measurement, and program monitoring to assure services follow the model.

Building working partnerships across organizations, through a formal meeting structure and regular communication, can help build effective collaboration. Especially in today's tough economic climate, collaboration can help solve funding challenges. These partnerships can also result in networking opportunities for consumers who need jobs—a critical component of anyone's job search in today's economy.

## ***“A Life Beyond Existing” - How Supported Employment Can Help with Recovery***

**“Sometimes, you just have to give working a try, and not wait until your symptoms go away or until you’ve resolved your own ambivalence about working – because neither of those things may happen.**

**Work was the final piece of the puzzle for my recovery. Medicines and therapy helped me get stable, but work helped me get better.”**

**- Nicole Clevenger**



444 Liberty Ave.  
Suite 240  
Pittsburgh, PA 15222  
Phone: 412-325-1100  
Fax: 412-325-1111  
Web: [www.ahci.org](http://www.ahci.org)

**OUR MISSION IS TO SUPPORT  
EQUITABLE ACCESS ACROSS  
ALL POPULATIONS TO QUALITY,  
HOLISTIC, COST-EFFECTIVE  
BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CARE**

For the past four years, Nicole Clevenger has worked as a consultant and trainer for the Ohio Supported Employment Coordinating Center of Excellence, a program of the Center for Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs) at Case Western Reserve University. She believes she’s made more progress towards her recovery in those four years than in the previous ten she spent receiving traditional mental health services, such as case management and therapy. A large part of her success is due to having participated in Supported Employment services that encouraged her to work.

Nicole had her first panic attack while a senior in college, but went on to complete her degree in Fine Arts. After several years as a stay-at-home mom, she tried finding part-time work as a waitress but anxiety attacks caused her to walk off the job numerous times. She sought help from Ohio’s Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation, but found the experience frustrating. She had to wait weeks for each appointment and had to take a series of tests to determine the “best” job placement for her. “I thought, ‘Come on! I have a college degree and I know what I want to do—teach, write or do social work.’ The entire experience reinforced the negative stigma I already felt about returning to work—that expectations for someone like me were low and I wasn’t allowed to choose my own goals.”

Several years later, Nicole was receiving help at a different mental health

agency that offered Supported Employment services. She started having conversations with a Supported Employment Specialist (SE Specialist) about her hopes and goals, and together they began looking for a job that matched her interests. Nicole spent the summer as an arts-and-crafts teacher at a children’s camp. The SE Specialist helped Nicole create a plan to handle a panic attack should one occur on the job, and this instilled confidence in her. “The Supported Employment Specialist had far more belief in my abilities than I did.”

About her experiences Nicole says, “Sometimes, you just have to give working a try, and not wait until your symptoms go away or until you’ve resolved your own ambivalence about working – because neither of those things may happen. Work was the final piece of the puzzle for my recovery. Medicines and therapy helped me get stable, but work helped me get *better*. I felt more normal, more responsible, and like I was a better parent because I was more relaxed and not always stressed about money. I had a life beyond just existing – I actually started to recover. A little boy in the arts and crafts class came up and told me that someday he wanted to be a teacher just like me, and it hit me that this whole time I was focused on what work meant for me, but he made me realize that my work had meaning for others.”

***Are you interested in training or learning more about Supported Employment?***

**Please let us know by completing the short survey included with the printed report. Or go to <https://www.surveymonkey.com/SE> to complete the survey online.**

***All responses received by August 15, 2009 will be entered to win a \$50 VISA gift card!***