



TIPS FOR SUCCESS FOR RECRUITING AND RETAINING EXCELLENT STAFF

People who are homeless must cope with the daily uncertainty of where they can safely sleep, how to tend to personal hygiene, and what they will eat. The struggle to secure basic needs is heightened by the presence of untreated illness and behavioral health conditions. Veterans who are homeless report chronic medical conditions and have a high risk for post-traumatic stress disorder. They often refuse help due to fear of appearing weak or damaged, disbelief that civilians truly understand military experiences, or an incomplete understanding of benefits.

The work life of homeless service staff can be equally complex. They must not only respond to and engage a sometimes reluctant population with unique needs, but also manage multiple systems and confront negative public attitudes. Their work often takes place in non-traditional settings that can feel unsafe or beyond their comfort zone. Low wages and lack of professional development opportunities can hasten staff turnover. Burnout and compassion fatigue of staff members are not uncommon (Mullen & Leginski, 2010).

This tip sheet is designed to help Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) grantees recruit and retain excellent staff who can effectively assist veterans experiencing homelessness obtain meaningful jobs within the labor force and connect them to supportive services in the community.

Recruit the right person for the job. Cast a wide net in your recruiting efforts, but remember that not everyone is well-suited to this work. The following adjectives describe individuals who are most successful at providing homeless services:

- Calm
- Clear-headed
- Centered
- Flexible
- Empathetic
- Patient
- Respectful
- Non-judgmental
- Committed
- Persistent
- Assertive
- Diplomatic
- Resourceful
- Creative

As you develop your recruitment strategy, choose those characteristics that most closely align with the mission and values of your program and the work style of your current staff members. You should also target individuals who:

- Demonstrate good judgement and street sense
- Take the initiative
- Hold realistic expectations
- Express a desire to learn
- Perform well as team players
- Exhibit cultural competence
- Communicate effectively in a non-threatening manner
- Set appropriate boundaries

Create diverse, multi-disciplinary teams. Women and veterans of color are overrepresented in the homeless population and underrepresented in the hiring of staff. In addition to reflecting the diversity of the demographics and community they serve, HVRP staff should include experts in various fields, such as employment, behavioral health, housing, and primary health care. Each member of the team can offer his or her unique perspective on an issue or problem confronting the team. A team of three may have a common background in workforce development, but each contributes a unique skill or specific knowledge, such as benefit planning or use of social media in job retention.

Supplement this content expertise with lived experience by hiring veterans who were formerly homeless as peer support professionals. The shared understanding of what veterans have been and are going through can make those who are currently homeless more willing to engage in services. Try to include as many different branches of the military (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard) as possible. The presence of a “comrade” or a “shipmate” can go a long way in building rapport and trust with veterans. Many times, retired military and other veterans want to give back, so consider creating

internships and volunteer positions. Internships can serve as a career pathway for vetting potential staff. Hiring veterans will also demonstrate that you “practice what you preach” to prospective employers.

Conduct new staff orientation. Once you have recruited the right people, it is important to keep them. Human resources professionals report that 4 percent of new employees leave their job if the first day does not go well; those who do stay decide whether the job is right for them within 3 weeks. One-fifth of staff turnover occurs in the first 45 days of employment (Farren, 2007).

Avoid an exit-prompting first day by providing a warm welcome and an orientation session. Compile a list of key people to whom the new employee should be introduced, and when possible, ask another staff member to act as a mentor or buddy to the new employee. Consider putting together a checklist or toolkit that includes what new employees need to know, such as essential forms, community resources and employers, and acronyms and common terms. Review new employees’ job description with them so they understand what is expected of them. Following that up with a review of the organizational chart will help them understand their role within the organization. This is particularly useful in those HVRP programs that are integrated with a larger veteran services team funded by other sources. Explain policies and procedures, such as working hours, use of technology, office organization and resources, HVRP philosophy, confidentiality, ethics, and accountability.

Offer formal and informal support. Once new employees have settled in, and particularly when the “job honeymoon” has passed, be sure to check in with employees about their overall impressions, answers any questions they have, and provide ongoing encouragement. Consistent supervision allows you to monitor employee performance, as well as address any concerns of the employee. Whether weekly individual sessions, group supervision, or “on-location” supervision during community outreach, tailor the schedule to the needs of the program and employee workload. Other formal supports include staff retreats with discernable

follow-up, peer support in team meetings, and critical incident debriefing.

Include staff in the decision-making process; their understanding of core issues may be different than that of management. Staff should have an opportunity to weigh in on issues and decisions that will affect the whole organization. They will feel better about hard choices if they feel they have a voice, even if the outcome is not what they would have preferred.

Less formal support is just as important in building team solidarity and preventing burnout. Make an effort to:

- Celebrate accomplishments
- Hold staff appreciation days
- Honor staff birthdays
- Facilitate social outings
- Inject humor into the workday
- Arrange workshops on self-care

Provide ongoing training and professional development. Training does not end with orientation. Employees should have at least a rudimentary understanding of the veterans they will be serving and their needs, as well as the systems that can respond to those needs, such as Departments of Veterans’ Affairs, Housing and Urban Development, and Health and Human Services. Documentation stipulated by HVRP requirements should also be included as part of initial training.

At regularly scheduled intervals, provide additional training that can enhance all homeless service staff members’ knowledge and performance. Relevant topics include behavioral and physical health, trauma-informed services, cultural competence, evidence-based practices, outreach and engagement, motivational interviewing, and housing options. For HVRP staff specifically, training on employment readiness/job placement, community-based job development, and job-driven training should be an ongoing work activity.

Make it too good to leave. You have less control over certain aspects of the HVRP program, such as employees' pay scale. Disappointment over low wages can be offset by opportunities to climb an established career ladder, but again limited funding may hinder your ability to offer many professional development opportunities. Be creative in providing opportunities for growth, such as memberships in career-related associations or monthly lunchtime seminars that feature directors of community programs and agencies, as well as business owners. Both opportunities can heighten staff awareness of local resources and promote outside networking that may lead to job creation for veterans. Asking HVRP personnel to share their respective

expertise with other staff members during lunchtime seminars will underscore their value to the organization and stay with the program. Acquiring more skills can also empower employees to pitch in wherever needed—another boost to their indispensability.

Consider other non-monetary incentives for remaining in the job, such as flexible scheduling of the work day. Emphasize your commitment to working reasonable hours and maintaining a healthy balance between work responsibilities and personal time. To the extent possible and appropriate, encourage physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual self-care among staff.

References

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