



## TIPS FOR SUCCESS FOR HELPING VETERANS TRANSITION TO JOBS AND KEEP THEM

Veterans experiencing homelessness who are seeking jobs or newly employed often face challenges that may go beyond what people with stable housing encounter in similar circumstances. In addition to issues such as adapting to unfamiliar routines, acquiring new skills, and learning the ropes at a new job, veterans experiencing homelessness must find ways to present a professional appearance and get to work on time, despite their lack of shelter. Because homelessness may have resulted from an earlier job loss, the stakes are high for those who are newly reconnected to the workforce.

Veterans who are homeless and are transitioning to employment will benefit from intensive support and a carefully thought-out, collaboratively developed individualized job retention plan. This can help them move with confidence into a new job and develop the skills and habits that will allow them to maintain employment over time. Employment is an important factor for many people as they move out of homelessness, and as an employment professional, you are in a position to help veterans maximize their possibilities for success as they move back into the work world. The following tips come from materials produced for the field that are based on research studies and hands-on experience of staff who have helped people transition to and maintain employment.

### The Voice of Experience: Tips from Formerly Homeless Workers

Broadway, a homelessness charity based in London, England, conducted a research study in 2013 in which they interviewed 50 homeless people who had just started back to work. Based on the study's findings, they published useful guides for both employment services providers and for people moving from homelessness to work. The following concrete tips come from the study participants themselves. You can share these with veterans and incorporate the ideas into your planning:

- **Know why you want to work.** This will help you stay motivated during difficult times.
- **Manage any mental health, drug or alcohol problems.** Working can help improve your mental health, but make sure you have support if you need it. Working can also help reduce your substance use, but if you have a serious problem, you need to deal with that first.
- **Get support.** Make sure there's someone to support you with practical things, give you emotional support, and support you around your goals and learning at work.
- **Starting work.** Plan for your first day. Expect to be nervous, and don't be afraid to ask questions. Find out how people behave in your workplace and try to do the same. Decide how much you want to tell people about yourself and your past.
- **Keeping work.** Ask for help and develop a positive attitude. Don't take on too much, and get support if you face problems. If you lose your job, keep on looking for work; maybe do volunteer work or take courses as you look.

(Adapted from Hough, J., Jones, J. & Rice, B., 2013a, p. 3)

### Preparing for the First Day of Work

The Center for Practice Innovations at Columbia University, under contract with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, created a practical, step-by-step *Employment Resource Book* for people with mental health issues who are entering the workforce. This comprehensive guide provides a wealth of information that is applicable to veterans experiencing homelessness who are looking for and starting employment.

Although much of the guide focuses on considerations before and during the job search, it includes a helpful section entitled *After Getting a Job*, which offers concrete suggestions and step-by-step worksheets to help people think through their concerns about specific job-related issues and develop useful, individualized strategies to approaching issues they face as new workers. Among the many helpful hints offered is a straightforward list of things to take into account when preparing for the first day of work:

- **Sleep:** Get a good night's sleep before your first day on the job. If necessary, train yourself to wake up at a new time.
- **Clothing:** Try on the kinds of clothes you will be wearing to work ahead of time. Do laundry ahead of time to make sure the outfit you want to wear is clean.
- **Food:** Bringing your lunch to work can save lots of money. Prepare it the night before if possible.
- **Commuting:** Whether you use public transportation or drive to work, take a test run beforehand at the time you would normally leave for work.
- **Write stuff down:** You might keep a pocket notebook to write down names of coworkers, where to find supplies, new tasks, and other job information.
- **Ask questions:** Don't be afraid to ask co-workers and supervisors where things are and how things are done.
- **Listen:** To learn best, listen carefully, and, if necessary, repeat back what you heard.
- **Blend in:** Watch how people talk, dress, and speak to one another, and try to match that behavior.
- **Think "team":** Look for ways to pitch in and help out. Look for routines in the workplace and try to model them.

(Adapted from Jewell, T., Margolies, P., Salerno, A., Scannevin G. & Dixon, L., 2014, pp. 208–209)

## Creating a Job Retention Plan

As veterans experiencing homelessness move into employment, it is important to develop a concrete plan to address common issues that may arise during the transition process. No plan can anticipate every possible problem, but as you work collaboratively with a client to develop an individualized job retention plan, you will want to consider the following factors that will help ensure success in a new job.

- Helping the individual decipher the culture and cues of the workplace.
- Understanding written workplace policies and procedures.
- Learning how to understand *unwritten* aspects of the work environment, such as dress codes, acceptable language, and how to gauge the social atmosphere.
- Observing and responding appropriately to workplace politics and avoiding conflicts.
- Supporting the worker in recognizing and adopting appropriate behavior for the particular workplace.
- Easing the transition from limited daily responsibilities to a new life with a set schedule and a job.
- Understanding how wages can affect outside benefits, and learning how to budget and establish/use bank accounts or other places to cash paychecks.
- Helping the person learn how to manage debts, child support payments, back taxes, fines, and similar responsibilities with their income.
- Discussing how to adapt to having a personal space on the job that is secure and safe for possessions, and how to effectively share such a space in a workplace.
- When needed, learning new skills, such as operating office equipment, using voice mail and email, and basic knowledge of using a computer.
- Identifying any other work-related supports that are specific to the individual's circumstances.

(Adapted from Ware, Martinez, & Rio, 2008, p. 27)

## Issues That Frequently Arise During the First Few Months of Work

The Broadway research study mentioned earlier found that many people experiencing homelessness report facing similar types of issues in their initial foray into the workforce. Letting the veterans that you serve know these experiences are common to anyone newly entering the workforce can make them feel more at ease as they make the transition.

### In the first month of work:

- **Building confidence:** Being homeless often leaves people with low confidence. Beginning a new job may be exciting, but it may feel overwhelming.
- **Creating a new routine:** Learn to get enough sleep, dress appropriately, arrange transportation, and arrive on time.
- **Learning the job role:** Learning new terminology and skills takes time and effort. They (like everyone) will make mistakes and can learn from them.
- **Learning workplace behavior:** The first few months are a time to adapt to new colleagues and learn how to recognize and adhere to the often unspoken behavioral expectations of the workplace.
- **Building workplace relationships:** People must decide when, if, and how much personal information to share with coworkers.
- **Managing financially until the first paycheck arrives:** People may need to negotiate new payment deadlines or borrow from a trusted source until they are paid.

### In the next several months after starting work:

- **Expanding skills:** People may need support if they find themselves outside their comfort zone as they try to keep up with new learning and work requirements.
- **Dealing with probationary meetings and assessments:** As people's performances are being reviewed, they may need support in learning how to take criticism and adjust their job habits in response.
- **Dealing with expectations:** People may find that the job does not live up to their expectations, or they may feel that they are not capable of living up to the expectations of their employer, and may need support to negotiate different expectations.
- **Thinking about the future:** People may feel their skills and potential are being recognized and may want to start planning for promotions or career changes.
- **Dealing with the uncertainty of change:** As people change their social circumstances, even positive changes can be stressful, and people may need support in adapting to their new lives and new appreciation of their own abilities.

(Adapted from Hough, J., Jones, J. & Rice, B., 2013b, p. 4–5)

## References

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