

EMPLOYMENT SUPPORTS: WHAT PERMANENT SUPPORTIVE HOUSING PROVIDERS NEED TO KNOW

The term Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) embraces a set of practices that are effective in helping people experiencing homelessness choose, get, and keep housing that meets their needs. Since 2007, the number of PSH beds has increased by 69 percent, with nearly 350,000 people living in PSH.¹ Because the PSH model is based on consumer choice, providers have considerable flexibility in how they implement PSH, including developing or renovating housing units or assisting with obtaining privately owned, scattered-site housing. This flexibility also extends to the service package. Although employment supports can be an effective part of a service package, they are not part of the “core” PSH model. It has been shown, however, that PSH programs can successfully retrofit and integrate effective Supported Employment services into PSH.²

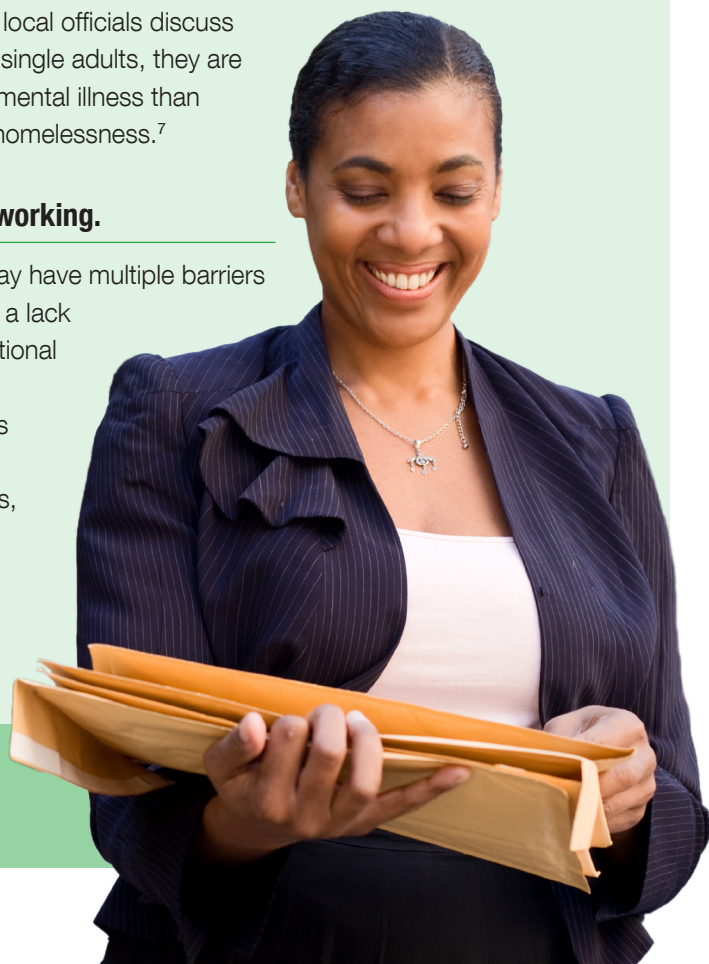
By adding employment supports to their mix of services, PSH providers can address their tenants’ needs and preferences and can help them increase their income and improve their lives. People experiencing homelessness overwhelmingly say they want to work, and the evidence suggests that with support, most of them can work. Just by being housed in PSH, they have cleared a major obstacle to finding and holding a job. Many PSH tenants—even those with histories of chronic homelessness—can work successfully in competitive jobs once they receive employment supports. Yet, PSH programs—particularly those serving single adults—are less likely than transitional housing providers to offer employment supports. By working with partners in the community, PSH providers can help tenants reach their full potential. However, if PSH programs do not provide employment services and supports, tenants will not achieve employment at the same rates possible when these services and supports are provided.

People experiencing homelessness want to work.

When assisting people experiencing homelessness, the assumption should be that they have an interest in earning income. Surveys conducted among adults experiencing homelessness in Detroit, Michigan,³ and Sacramento, California,⁴ revealed that around nine in ten want to work. Even people with significant barriers to employment want to work. One study of people with serious mental illness living in scattered-site Housing First units found that 69 percent wanted to work.⁵ People understand that employment can be a path out of homelessness.⁶ Yet, when local officials discuss the reasons for homelessness among single adults, they are more likely to cite substance use and mental illness than unemployment as a leading cause of homelessness.⁷

Housing removes a key barrier to working.

People experiencing homelessness may have multiple barriers to finding and keeping a job, including a lack of education and experience, a correctional history, or employer preconceptions. However, PSH can remove the barriers that are intrinsic to homelessness, which include lack of a mailing address, challenges to maintaining hygiene and wardrobe, and difficulty getting to job interviews.⁸



“Our data indicate that being assigned to a Housing First group was associated with initially lower odds of employment, highlighting the need for adjunctive supported-employment services. Concerning earnings, Housing First had no statistically significant impact on income from government sources, employment, or street activities.”

— Poremski, D.; Stergiopoulos, V.; Braithwaite, E.; Distasio, J.; Nisenbaum, R.; & Latimer, E. (2016). Effects of Housing First on Employment and Income of Homeless Individuals: Results of a Randomized Trial. *Psychiatric Services*, 67, 603–609.

Providing evidence-based employment supports in PSH can dramatically improve employment outcomes.

The Ending Chronic Homelessness through Employment and Housing Initiative, in which 44 percent of tenants found competitive employment,⁹ helped demonstrate the value of including employment in PSH for people with histories of chronic homelessness. Providing employment supports has a significant positive effect on both employment and housing stability.¹⁰ A study conducted with L.A. HOPE in the city’s “Skid Row” neighborhood compared those who received housing and employment supports with similarly situated people who only received housing. Among those receiving housing supports, 57 percent worked and 27 percent found competitive employment, compared to 22 percent and 13 percent, respectively, among those who did not receive employment supports.¹¹ A recent randomized controlled trial found that 34 percent of adults with mental illnesses in scattered-site housing who received Individual Placement and Support (IPS) services found competitive employment, compared to 22 percent of tenants who did not receive IPS services.¹²

Engaging tenants in employment supports requires persistence but produces results.

Although many tenants will have an interest in working, they will not necessarily have an interest in receiving employment supports, as many PSH programs target people who have been unwilling to accept strings-attached housing. However, the evidence shows that efforts to engage tenants in evidence-based employment supports like IPS pay off. A study comparing outcomes in a scattered-site Housing First program revealed that only 56 percent of tenants who wanted to work were willing to participate in Supported Employment.¹³ People with fewer barriers to employment were less likely to accept employment supports, and, accordingly, those who refused the services were less likely to obtain employment. Therefore, it is important to stress the availability of supports, even for those who think they can find work without them.

Many PSH programs are missing out on opportunities to help tenants work.

Despite the opportunity to boost tenants’ income (and therefore housing revenue) through employment, most PSH programs do not make employment a major focus. In Minnesota, for example, only 36 percent of PSH programs focused on employment and increasing income, compared to 57 percent of transitional housing programs.¹⁴ Further, only 43 percent of the state’s PSH programs (vs. 65 percent of transitional housing programs) report that virtually all residents received help with employment in the previous year.¹⁵

Single men may be especially unlikely to receive employment supports in PSH.

Many single men without children would benefit from employment supports, as they are less likely than women with dependent children to receive housing subsidies and other assistance. Yet, PSH programs appear to be less likely to provide services to single men without children. An evaluation of the HUD-VASH program found that female veterans served by the program were much more likely than men to have dependent children and were much more likely to receive employment supports.¹⁶ Data from Minnesota are consistent with this finding. PSH programs serving families were more likely to offer employment supports than

those serving individuals, and people served by family programs were nearly twice as likely to have worked prior to entering PSH (29 percent vs. 15 percent).¹⁷ Although employment offers the means to support a family, it also offers the opportunity for single adults to support themselves.

Employment is more effective for raising income than benefits assistance alone.

Helping tenants increase their unearned income through disability benefits is an important activity for PSH programs. However, focusing solely on increasing unearned income represents a lost opportunity because having unearned income alone keeps most people in poverty. In an Austin, Texas study, for example, only 23 out of 145 tenants (16 percent) gained or maintained employment. As a result, only 22 had a monthly income over \$1,000.¹⁸ Those who gained employment fared much better, with 5 of 23 having a total monthly income of over \$1,500. Because of work incentives available under Social Security, the HUD Earned Income Disallowance, as well as the Earned Income Tax Credit, PSH residents who work even a little bit can significantly improve their lifestyle without jeopardizing the continued receipt of benefits. Studies conducted in public housing demonstrate that the combination of employment supports, changing rent rules to “make work pay,” and conversations about work result in increased income.¹⁹

Employment has intangible benefits beyond income.

Work has important positive benefits beyond financial gain. Competitive work offers the opportunity to improve behavioral health symptoms, quality of life, and self-esteem.²⁰ People experiencing homelessness value work over and above its economic rewards for much the same reasons that other people do. Through work, we engage the world and become a part of it; we lay claim to membership in the broader community; and, in getting paid for our work, we have that membership confirmed by others.²¹ Among people with justice involvement, employment may delay re-incarceration.²²

Resources are available to help PSH programs include employment services.

PSH programs can promote employment either through their own initiatives or by partnering with community resources. Throughout the United States, the U.S. Department of Labor supports a nationwide network of American Job Centers. Although these centers are required to provide services to people experiencing homelessness, establishing partnerships with these centers can help ensure that PSH tenants can take full advantage of the services. Additionally, local behavioral health systems may offer evidence-based Supported Employment. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) offers a comprehensive toolkit for implementing this service.





For more information about work incentives and employment supports:

American Job Centers: <https://www.careeronestop.org/localhelp/americanjobcenters/american-job-centers.aspx>

HUD, Annual Earned Income Disallowance FAQ: https://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/public_indian_housing/programs/ph/rhiip/faq_gird#aieid

HUD, Annual Earned Income Disallowance 2016 Rule: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/03/08/2016-04901/streamlining-administrative-regulations-for-public-housing-housing-choice-voucher-multifamily#h-15>

Internal Revenue Service, Earned Income Tax Credit: <https://www.irs.gov/Credits-&-Deductions/Individuals/Earned-Income-Tax-Credit>

SAMHSA Supported Employment Evidence-based Practices KIT: <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/Supported-Employment-Evidence-Based-Practices-EBP-KIT/SMA08-4365>

Social Security, Work Incentives: <https://www.ssa.gov/disabilityresearch/workincentives.htm>

Ticket to Work Program: <http://www.chooseworkttw.net/>

Endnotes

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- ¹⁰ Rio, Ware, Tucker, & Martinez, 2008.

Endnotes (continued)

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