

Tips for Transitional Jobs Programs Serving People Experiencing Homelessness

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Program Technical Assistance Series

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People experiencing homelessness overwhelmingly express a desire to work. Employment can be critical in obtaining and maintaining stable housing; it helps meet emotional, physical and intellectual needs and its prolong absence is linked to many negative impacts including poor physical and mental health.¹ For those who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness, the opportunity to engage in immediate, real work for immediate pay can stabilize individuals in communities, offer a bridge to develop new skills and work habits, and support the transition into unsubsidized employment.

Transitional Jobs (TJ) is an employment strategy that seeks to overcome employment barriers and transition people with labor market barriers into work using wage-paid, short-term employment that combines real work, skill development and supportive services. The TJ model, among several employment models that serve those facing homelessness, is a promising strategy to help people at risk or experiencing homelessness attach to the labor market through rapid placement in a job that pays real wages coupled with support services like life skills training that together can help facilitate the transition to unsubsidized employment.

A number of TJ programs specifically target people experiencing homelessness, and virtually all TJ programs, regardless of their primary target populations, serve at least some participants who are experiencing homelessness or have unstable housing.

Based on a 2009 National Transitional Jobs Network survey, the majority of TJ programs (61.3 percent) report serving people experiencing homelessness and many more participants in TJ programs face unstable housing situations.²

TJ programs offer people experiencing homelessness an opportunity to re-enter the workforce and help them achieve stable housing through earned income. (For more information on how TJ fits in the spectrum of employment interventions for people experiencing homelessness, please see **Employment Program Models for People Experiencing Homelessness**, part of the **NTJN's Working to End Homelessness series**.)

This brief offers recommendations for employment programs using the TJ model to serve jobseekers who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. These recommendations reflect the most relevant research findings as well as the experiences of expert TJ practitioners.

The keys in this guide are intended to help ensure that all TJ programs are equipped to meet the needs of this population.

Key #1 Accommodate the Unique Needs of Those Experiencing Unstable Housing

People experiencing homelessness or living in unstable housing often have immediate needs like food, clothing, laundry, and showers. These needs may have to be met quickly, before a participant can successfully engage in employment programming. Meeting these immediate needs can also serve as an incentive to employment program engagement at the start of the program. Even if a TJ program does not specifically target this population, having partnerships already established with emergency shelters, transitional housing and permanent supportive housing can be critical to a participant's success. For example, the **CARA/Cleanslate** program in Chicago obtains housing for un-housed participants through a network of local housing assistance partners. For participants staying in shelters scheduling flexibility is especially important, as they often have regimented schedules for entering and leaving the facility.

Address Service Needs

People experiencing or at risk of homelessness are a diverse group and require a range of service needs. It is critical that TJ programs recognize the different subpopulations of people experiencing homelessness and design their services accordingly. For example, families that are homeless may require coordination with local schools, daycare placement, and standard child care, whereas individuals experiencing chronic homelessness may require access to mental health services in order to successfully transition from TJ to unsubsidized work.

Supportive Services After TJ Employment

For people who have experienced homelessness or housing insecurity, the supportive services that TJ programs deliver may need to extend beyond the TJ period and into unsubsidized employment—this is especially true for housing-related services.

Adopting Longer TJ Lengths-Program Examples: **The Doe Fund** and **Rubicon Programs**

Experiencing homelessness can result in frequent spells of unemployment and underemployment, which can diminish job skills and work readiness. Several successful TJ programs working with this population, like **The Doe Fund** of New York and Philadelphia and **Rubicon Programs** in Richmond, CA, have adopted longer and more flexible transitional work periods to accommodate the increased time some might need in order to get reacquainted with the workplace and become job ready for unsubsidized employment.

Longer or more flexible TJ length allows participants the flexibility of utilizing these exploratory jobs to determine when participants are work-ready and equipped to meet the demands of unsubsidized employment. Longer engagement can also allow participants experiencing homelessness to gain technology skills that are necessary in the contemporary job market but which can take time to attain. However, longer periods of TJ can present a trade-off as delays in attaining unsubsidized employment can also delay entry into market-rate housing.

Additionally, unsubsidized employment retention services should include efforts to identify and address “triggers” such as a long or difficult commute, problematic or unstable living arrangements, and earnings that are inadequate to meet basic needs like rent and bills.

For more information on the diverse characteristics and employment service needs of different populations that experience homelessness, please see **Populations Experiencing Homelessness: Diverse barriers to employment and how to address them**, part of the **NTJN's Working to End Homelessness** series.

Key #2 Maintain Participant Engagement and Retention

TJ programs serving this population should structure the program to ensure long-term program engagement and participation. Programs that have adopted longer TJ employment lengths should create strategies to maintain the level of interest and program engagement of participants from the onset all the way through to unsubsidized job placement, such as offering choices within a range of employment and training opportunities. Programs with all or most supportive services such as adult education or life skills training under one roof may be especially helpful for participants experiencing homelessness because participants only need to build relationships with one group of staff, learn the layout of one building, and travel to one location.³ Also, as a core component of the TJ model, paid wages replicate the competitive unsubsidized employment setting and provide an incentive to remain engaged through challenging program aspects like life skills training for which benefits emerge over the long term.

Provide Multiple Employment Options

Providing multiple options for subsidized employment placements can help build and maintain participant engagement. Participants placed in Transitional Jobs that are a good match with their skills, experiences and interests are more likely to remain engaged with the tasks and goals of the program. TJ programs that offer multiple TJ employment options utilize their better participant job matching by pairing participation in the less immediately rewarding program aspects like adult education or life skills training to continued employment and the paid wages that come with it.

Special Consideration for In-House TJ Employment

Social enterprises and other in-house TJ programs should take extra care to plan TJ opportunities that offer as wide a variety of subsidized job options as possible, perhaps by rotating transitional workers through multiple roles within the operation. They may also look to build partnerships with employers for TJ placement in addition to post-program unsubsidized placement, or offer “stepped” TJ opportunities in which participants move from in-house TJ to subsidized positions at local employers.

Increased Program Engagement Program Example: **The Doe Fund**

The Doe Fund manages to sustain program engagement despite a long TJ length through progressive opportunities in TJ employment, and training and educational experiences. After an initial TJ placement in a community improvement work crew, participants can begin working in more skilled positions at one of **The Doe Fund's** many social enterprises in such business lines as culinary arts, pest control, resource recovery, security, and energy efficient building maintenance, as well as participate in job training and educational opportunities. Using strategies like offering exciting new skills and opportunities to participants who have achieved earlier program benchmarks, **The Doe Fund** is able to increase participant engagement through the latter TJ phases.

Key #3 Re-introduce Participants to the Community

TJ programs serving those experiencing or at risk of homelessness should focus on building trust and respect among participants and staff. Those who have experienced homelessness may have encountered negative situations with community institutions like law enforcement during periods of homelessness and be distrustful of people. Programs serving those who have experienced homelessness often state that positive participant self-esteem, personal identity, and sense of self-worth are integral in program success and self-sufficiency attainment. TJ programs are especially well-suited to re-introduce participants to the community since TJ models real work through placements in businesses or through social enterprises that can be specifically designed to implement positive community exposure.

Work Crew Program Examples: CARA/Cleanslate, The Doe Fund, Rubicon Programs, and Chrysalis Enterprises

Several TJ programs like CARA/Cleanslate have found considerable success in re-introducing their participants to the public through the TJ employment itself. Dressed in professional and easily identifiable uniforms, Cleanslate participants interact with the community at public worksites cleaning sidewalks. Participants often receive added respect in being part of a uniformed work crew, and, in receiving respect, they reciprocate that respect to community members, fostering new positive relationships. Rubicon Programs, Chrysalis Enterprises in the Los Angeles area and The Doe fund all use similar community service work crew structures for their TJ participants.

Life Skill Training

TJ programs may need to focus on helping participants become reacquainted with the skills needed to be reconnected to their communities again as working members. Participants experiencing homelessness or unstable housing may require specific life skills training and tangible supports like professional clothing for job interviews. Those who have experienced homelessness benefit from training in how to identify and avoid poor housing choices that may contain abusive situations or bad influences, which can present additional barriers in the future. TJ programs are well suited to provide the necessary level of life skills training as it is a core component of the TJ model.

Conclusion

While the TJ model can successfully help those experiencing or at risk of homelessness become self-sufficient, the barrier of unstable housing must be assessed and addressed. To address this barrier, programs should consider providing or coordinating supports like housing or extensive life skills training, tailor TJ length and job variety, and formulate a plan of how to reintroduce the participant to their local community. The TJ model is meant to be tailored to the specific populations served by acknowledging that “barriers to employment” have many faces and each unique barrier requires a unique approach.

Endnotes

1 Shaheen, G., Rio, J. (2007). Recognizing Work as a Priority in Preventing or Ending Homelessness. Journal of Primary Prevention.

2 Transitional Jobs Program Survey performed by Heartland Alliance’s National Transitional Jobs Network. April, 2009.

3 Cook, J.A, et al. (2005). Integration of Psychiatric and Vocational Services: A Multisite Randomized, Controlled Trial of Supported Employment. American Journal of Psychiatry.

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The National Transitional Jobs Network (NTJN) is a coalition of city, state, and federal policy makers; community workforce organizations; anti-poverty nonprofit service providers and advocacy organizations committed to advancing and strengthening Transitional Jobs programs around the country so that people with barriers to employment can gain success in the workplace and improve their economic lives and the economic conditions of their communities. The NTJN supports a constituency of over 5,000 active members and stakeholders across the country.

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