

IPS Supported Employment for People Experiencing Homelessness

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Abstract

SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access and Recovery (SOAR) helps increase access to Social Security Administration (SSA) disability benefits for people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness by providing SSA with complete and comprehensive applications. Use of the SOAR process significantly increases approval rates on Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) applications,¹ resulting in a significant step toward recovery for individuals who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. For many persons in recovery accessing benefits is a first step. But SOAR extends beyond and also encourages employment as a means to increase individual income and further promote recovery. Supported Employment, especially the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model, is proven to help increase employment for people with disabilities.

Introduction

Individual Placement and Support (IPS) is a model of supported employment that has been developed over the past 25 years specifically for people who have behavioral health needs. It has been shown to be effective in 22 experiments around the world (<http://www.dartmouthips.org>). It is the only approach to employment that has been proven effective by research for people with behavioral health needs (Marshall et al., 2014).

This issue brief describes the following:

- How IPS helps people to find and keep satisfying jobs
- What are expected employment outcomes
- How IPS helps people who have experienced homelessness
- How you can find IPS employment services
- Sources for more information

Benefits of Employment

People report that they benefit from competitive employment (regular jobs with regular wages) in many ways:

- A higher income that provides assistance out of poverty
- A positive role and identity
- Improved self-esteem
- New friendships and inclusion in the community
- Increased structure, routines, and goals
- A path out of homelessness and toward recovery

One consumer said, “Working gives me a reason to get up in the morning. And that is the best medicine.” Another said, “The money is nice, but I feel good telling my son that I have to go to work in the morning.” And another, “I like telling people that I work at the Federal Reserve rather than I am an unemployed mental patient.”

“I like telling people that I work at the Federal Reserve rather than I am an unemployed mental patient.”
— Anonymous

¹ 2014 SOAR Outcomes Summary. (2014, July 1). Retrieved from <http://soarworks.prainc.com/files/SOAR2014Outcomes508.pdf>

As Peggy Swarbrick, leader of peer services in New Jersey, puts it, “Work promotes wellness in all dimensions: emotional, financial, social, spiritual, physical, intellectual, and environmental” (Swarbrick, 2015).

How IPS Helps

Consumer leaders have called IPS “the most person-centered intervention” because it emphasizes an individual’s strengths, goals, and preferences rather than problems.

The principles of IPS are the following:

1. **IPS is open to anyone who wants to work.** People are not screened out or turned down because they have symptoms, are homeless, or are not considered ready for employment. The person who wants to work chooses when to sign up for IPS.
2. **IPS helps people find and succeed in competitive jobs.** IPS does not emphasize sheltered or volunteer jobs because people with behavioral health needs want regular, paid employment, just like everyone else.
3. **IPS helps people search rapidly for a preferred job.** The IPS specialist helps the person identify a preferred job from the first meeting, often by asking about past jobs, preferences, skills, and goals. IPS does not use extensive testing, training, or practicing.
4. **The IPS worker and the person collaborate on the job search.** Sometimes the specialist goes to meet employers and develop a job, sometimes the person applies on his or her own, and sometimes they go together.
5. **IPS honors the person’s preferences.** Like all decisions in IPS, the person’s preferences determine when to look for a job, job choice, job development, disclosure, and job supports. The individual discusses these decisions with the IPS worker and has the ultimate say.
6. **IPS provides long-term supports.** Once employed, the person and the employment specialist plan job supports, just like they planned a job and a search strategy. The supports may occur entirely away from the job site or they may involve regular site visits or contact with the employer.
7. **IPS integrates vocational services and mental health services.** When services are separate, people get different messages, but IPS uses a

Darlene’s Story

I work over 30 hours per week as a cashier and have done so since last June. But a year ago, I felt confused about work because I have been through a lot in my life. I had problems with homelessness and drinking in the past. I felt nervous and afraid. And I didn’t feel like people were on my side—I had a little edge. Homeless people deal with a lot, including being treated like you are nobody.

After I was referred to IPS, Marcy (my employment specialist) would knock on my door and call me and I would think, “Oh, I don’t feel like dealing with her.” But she did not give up and just kept coming back. At one point I lost a job offer because I failed a drug test, but Marcy said, “That’s okay. It’s a learning experience.” Then I decided that I wouldn’t make that mistake again.

After my first day of work, I wanted to quit. I told my employment specialist that I wasn’t going back, but she encouraged me to keep going. The computer training was tough. Marcy went to work with me to help me learn the computer. I’m shy and I was tongue-tied at work, so at first Marcy would talk to the other people at work. But then one day I told her that I had to start talking for myself.

I love to work. I want to pay my rent and take care of myself. I felt like I didn’t count when I didn’t work, but when I work I am proud. Now I count.

team model, with the person at the center of the team. The person can choose specific services, decline services, and change his or her mind about services. But the team is all in agreement about the process and goals.

8. **IPS ensures benefits counseling.** People need to know exactly what will happen with their Supplemental Security Income (SSI)/Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) payments, other benefits, and insurance when they go to work. The team respects the person’s ability and right to make decisions regarding how much to work and earn.

Outcomes for People in IPS

People who sign up for IPS can expect certain services and outcomes. An IPS specialist meets with the person right away and helps to develop a career profile (e.g., strengths and preferred jobs), discuss benefits, and agree on a job search plan (e.g., how to contact employers and what to say). The search starts rapidly. Most people begin to contact employers within a month and start a first job in about four to five months (Bond, Drake, & Becker, 2012).

About 60 percent of IPS participants obtain a competitive job (Bond, et al., 2012). Others drop out or decide they do not want to work. The IPS specialist helps create a job support plan (e.g., help with transportation, learning the job, or talking with the employer about accommodations).

First jobs tend to last several months or more, but if the person is not satisfied with the job, the IPS specialist helps with resigning and finding another job that is more suitable.

For people who do not find a job rapidly, additional supports may help. For example, some people want to get more education, work at home, design their own job, or improve their attention and memory for work. The IPS specialist can help to develop these other plans.

IPS and Homelessness

Many people who have recently experienced homelessness have participated in IPS, including one study where all the participants were recruited from homeless shelters in a large city (Drake et al., 1999). The good news has been that people who have recently or are currently experiencing homelessness have just as much success as others in IPS; they are just as likely to find and keep satisfying jobs.

Duration of Employment

Another piece of good news is that once people start working in competitive jobs, they tend to become steady employees over many years. In fact, 10-year follow-up studies show that about half the people who receive IPS services are consistent workers 10 years later (Becker, Whitley, Bailey, & Drake, 2007; Salyers, Becker, Drake, Torrey, & Wyzik, 2004).

Shawn's Story

Shawn was homeless after a two-year jail sentence for domestic assault. Because of his criminal conviction, he lost his family and his ability to continue in the teaching profession that he loved. Living in a shelter and feeling hopeless, Shawn started meeting with an IPS employment specialist.

The employment specialist helped him quickly get a job detailing cars at a Toyota car dealership due to his dire need for income. He thrived at the job and regained some confidence. Shawn shared with the employment specialist that he wanted help to develop a new career path, since he could no longer be a teacher. They started looking into various trades and Shawn took the entrance exam for the local BEW electricians union and passed with a 90 percent. Now he is in training to have a good career as an electrician.

In the meantime, he was also approved for Section 8 and recently moved into his own apartment. Shawn credits IPS with helping him feel hopeful about his future after several years of hopelessness.

How to find IPS services

IPS services are expanding rapidly in over half of U.S. states and many countries outside of the United States. States that currently provide IPS include Alabama, California (Alameda County), Colorado, Connecticut, the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin. If you live in one of these states, the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation or the Department of Mental Health should be able to tell you where IPS services are located. In addition, IPS services are currently offered in every Veterans Healthcare Administration medical center (more than 150) in the U.S.

Other countries that offer IPS include Australia, Belgium, Canada, China (Hong Kong), Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

Myths About Supported Employment

Myth: Supported employment jobs are short-term, dead-end jobs.

Fact: Supported employment specialists help people get an amazing variety of jobs. The jobs match participants' preferences and capabilities. While some participants hold supported employment positions for a relatively brief period of time, the average job tenure in a supported employment job is between 10 months and 2 years (Bond, & Kukla, 2011; Hoffmann, Jäckel, Glauser, Mueser, & Kupper, 2014).

Myth: If I am in a supported employment program I will need to disclose my mental illness.

Fact: Disclosure is not a requirement. What a person discloses is a personal choice. Some surveys show that less than half of all supported employment participants with severe mental illness disclose. (Jones, 2011).

Myth: I have a criminal justice record. No employer will hire me.

Fact: According to one national survey, about two out of three employers surveyed said that they had knowingly hired at least one person with a felony conviction (Swanson, Langfitt-Reese, & Bond, 2012).

More information

The IPS website (<http://www.dartmouthips.org>) has more information, including videos, articles, books, frequently asked questions, and online courses. You can also sign up for the IPS newsletter.

SSA Work Incentives

SSA provides many incentives for working. SSI and SSDI rules and regulations allow beneficiaries to maintain health insurance and cash benefits while working. Because SSI is based on need and SSDI on a person's past earnings, increased income from employment affects the two programs differently.

For SSI beneficiaries, benefits are adjusted based on the amount of earned and unearned income. Income exclusions and other adjustments, such as the Plan to Achieve Self-Support, impairment-related work expenses, and expedited reinstatement of benefits, help people returning to work. See SOAR issue brief, *SOAR and Employment for SSI/SSDI Beneficiaries*, for details: http://soarworks.prainc.com/files/SOAR_and_Employment.pdf

For SSDI beneficiaries, SSA offers a trial work period, an extended period of eligibility, and a subsidy, in addition to the impairment-related work expenses and expedited reinstatement of benefits. See SOAR issue brief, *SOAR and Employment for SSI/SSDI Beneficiaries*, for details: http://soarworks.prainc.com/files/SOAR_and_Employment.pdf

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This issue brief was produced by the SOAR Technical Assistance Center under contract to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The SOAR Technical Assistance Center develops and provides training and technical assistance to support adults, as well as youth in transition to adulthood, who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness to apply for SSA disability benefits. For more information about SOAR, go to <http://soarworks.prainc.com>