



# Consumer Employment *in the Health Care for the Homeless* Setting: Promising Practices

## Introduction

Numerous social determinants of health—including inadequate affordable housing, poor access to health care, unemployment, and low wages—drive the modern crisis of mass homelessness. While Health Care for the Homeless (HCH) providers properly focus their resources on meeting clients' immediate physical and behavioral health needs, and often on securing housing, the employment-related needs of HCH clients have received less attention.

In addition to providing money for tangible necessities, the impact of employment extends to mental and physical well-being, as well as the breadth of an individual's social network. Paid work provides security, a sense of hope, and an identity. Job loss can have the inverse impact, leaving individuals aimless, disconnected and depressed. <sup>1</sup> An American Psychological Association study of able-bodied individuals of working age reveals that unemployed individuals are twice as likely to report psychological problems such as depression, anxiety and poor self-esteem<sup>2</sup>.

Unemployment may also lead to loss of employer-sponsored health insurance, and increased vulnerability, especially for those with chronic health conditions who regularly rely on primary health care. Homelessness itself stands as a painful consequence of job loss. The community of HCH grantees recognizes the role of employment as a primary contributor to ending homelessness and securing health care access for the population they serve.

This report highlights employment strategies that six organizations apply in hiring individuals who have experienced homelessness and received health services. Of the six organizations profiled, four are HCH grantees, and the two others (one providing respite care and the other housing) are closely affiliated with local HCH health centers. Four of the organizations have workforces of over 230 people, one has a staff of 31, and the other 15. Four are based in metropolitan areas of between 80,000 and 700,000 people, and two are based in a major metropolitan area with a population of over 2 million.

The case studies reveal mission-based hiring practices that recognize the unique assets and needs of employees who are or have been consumers. Their approaches to hiring and managing a consumer-inclusive workforce demonstrate a commitment to their employees and their conviction in the unique value a diverse workforce brings. Their stories demonstrate the impact of consumer employment, not only on the lives of individual employees, but on the institutions that hire them.

## Background

Over the past two years, the membership of the National Health Care for the Homeless Council has emphasized the importance of employment as an integral strategy for ending homelessness and improving health outcomes. In collaboration with partners including Saffron Strand and the National Transitional Jobs Network, the Council has produced webinars focused on integrating employment strategies into supportive housing programs and encouraging employment-related cultural competence in the HCH setting. The Council's partnership with the National Transitional Jobs Network yielded *Work Matters: Employment as a Tool for Preventing Homelessness and Improving Health* and a related webinar. The tool kit provides information on specific workforce development models and asset-building strategies useful to programs that serve individuals experiencing homelessness.

In August and September of 2013, the Council disseminated a survey to 248 organizations, most of them HCH grantees, to learn about health center adherence to the HRSA governance requirement related to consumer representation. The survey also provided an opportunity to mention other activities offered at health centers, among them, employment, that demonstrated a commitment to consumer leadership and development. Five of the 38 respondents reported hiring consumers as staff.

This data was a starting point for examining the experiences of health centers that hire consumers. In addition to the five health centers that responded to the survey, the Council contacted another agency known to hire consumers. Interviews with administrative staff and consumer-employees, together with contextual research, sought to discern how hiring practices, policies and programs promoted employment for HCH consumers. There was a special focus on health centers that hired consumers onto their workforce and an examination of the impacts of consumers on culture and operations as well as on the individual consumer employees.. This examination of the work of these service providers and the experience of consumer employees, reveals mechanisms that effectively support consumer employment and that move those organizations toward fulfillment of their missions.

## Case Studies

### Central City Concern – Portland, Oregon

#### ***Employment Programming***

Central City Concern (CCC) is a multi-service nonprofit organization with more than 600 employees. CCC's programming centers around four strategies: direct access to housing, integrated health services, development of peer relationships, and attainment of income through benefits or employment. Employment programs through CCC are multifaceted: strong relationships with local businesses and nonprofits serve as

opportunities for meaningful job referrals, and CCC also hires individuals who have experienced homelessness and received CCC services.

CCC consumers have access to employment services and work experience opportunities through the Employment Access Center, the Community Volunteer Corps (CVC), Clean and Safe, and the on-call pool. CVC takes approximately three months to complete, provides a small stipend, offers mentored volunteer opportunities, and basic employment skills development. Working with other nonprofits, volunteer teams engage in park beautification, computer recycling and community gardening. All CVC participants have gained housing and/or received other CCC services. Of these individuals, many have experienced long-term unemployment and are seeking basic skills like developing a work routine and communication strategies.

Graduates of CVC may apply for a six-month paid training program with Clean & Safe that operates through a contract with the Portland Business Alliance. Job duties involve keeping Portland's downtown streets clean and removing graffiti.

Many individuals who complete the Clean and Safe training program apply for a position in the on-call pool at CCC, filling in for permanent janitorial and front-desk staff who are sick or on vacation. For those who are interested and demonstrate proficiency, there is the possibility of attaining a full-time regular job in one of these positions. On-call employees gain transferable skills that they may use within CCC and in the broader job marketplace.

The Employment Access Center (EAC) is a comprehensive employment resources center available to all CCC consumers. The EAC offers classes on resume writing, interviewing, and computer skills. Consumers who use the EAC can also take advantage of computer, internet, copier and voice mail services.

Informed largely by the Individualized Placement and Support (IPS) model, CCC uses Employment Specialists (ES) to support consumers seeking employment through the EAC. CCC strives to provide all CCC Consumers with access to an ES, who serves as both an employment consultant and job developer. Clay Cooper, CCC's Director of Social Enterprises and Employment Services, attests that an ES tries to find consumers jobs that are "not just survival jobs. We try to place people in positions in which they see hope and a career." The EAC provides resume writing classes and facilitates job club workshops that focus on interviewing and appropriate business attire. The ES will maintain contact after a consumer gains employment to assure the job experience is starting off well. In the role of job developer, the ES develops relationships with local businesses to foster potential hiring opportunities. The ES also helps assure potential employers that CCC consumers are excellent job candidates—prepared, driven, and committed to quality work.

### ***Challenges and Policies***

Rebecca Birenbaum, CCC's Senior Director of HR and Legal Affairs, identifies a number of challenges involved in hiring individuals with little experience in the workforce. Birenbaum notes that unfamiliarity with professional expectations, including timeliness and other work-appropriate norms, can prohibit individuals from advancing into employment. Behaviors that could cross workplace boundaries can be especially problematic for individuals recently hired into positions where they must engage with clients as a professional and not as a friend. Boundary problems can also happen for other CCC staff and administrators, according to Birenbaum. For example, housing staff may be aware of a tenant's recent substance abuse. If the tenant is also a CCC employee, the housing staff must keep the information

confidential as part of the landlord/tenant relationship. However, housing staff will encourage the tenant to disclose the recent relapse to HR as part of their recovery plan. This encouragement has proven to be successful at CCC.

CCC has developed trainings and practices that address some of its unique challenges among new employees. All CCC employees participate in training on appropriate workplace behaviors when they begin working at CCC as do those who seek employment through the EAC. Birenbaum says that intentional, hands-on supervision is critical. "For us, it is really time-consuming. We spend a lot of time with folks, but it is worth it. We engage our managers so they can help their staff become better employees." Birenbaum says the Human Resources department developed policies that protect the privacy of individuals, whether they are tenants, employees or treatment participants. In the scenario mentioned above, the tenant's behavior would only be reported to the tenant's supervisor if behavior interfered with employment.

### ***Impact of the Central City Concern Model***

Birenbaum describes the impetus for incorporating employment into the agency's programming as related to its philosophy of recovery and self-sufficiency. "Health care, housing and employment are all part of recovery." Birenbaum estimates that almost half of the CCC workforce is in recovery or has experienced homelessness. According to Birenbaum, there are countless stories of individuals who began in CVC, became a trainee, worked on-call and eventually became a program supervisor. Fletcher Nash, CCC's Human Resources Compliance Coordinator, is one example.

Nash lived under a bridge for several years while managing a drug habit and accumulating an arrest record, conditions which led him to qualify for CCC's Housing Rapid Response program and treatment. The program design allowed him to maintain his housing and supported his motivation toward recovery. Nash stayed clean and began to focus on measures to gain self-sufficiency; he learned basic job skills in the CVC program and moved into the Clean and Safe program, which provided a regular hourly wage and greater responsibility. After completing Clean and Safe and moving into an on-call janitor position briefly, he accepted a community building assistant position overseeing two of CCC's properties where he worked for a year. An opening in the Human Resources department intrigued Nash, who said that before his second interview for the job, "I felt stoked just to be considered for that second interview. My confidence was coming back." Fletcher Nash has maintained his position in the HR department for a year and envisions a long-term career with the organization that he says, "gave me my life back."

### ***Lessons Learned***

CCC is nationally recognized for its supportive employment programming. Unfortunately, budgets and funding availability for its job programming have declined in recent years. Birenbaum and Cooper both mention renewed funding for their employment programming as a direction and a goal.

Birenbaum advises other organizations that might be interested in hiring consumers that senior leadership must understand and support employment programming and training. The complexities of managing a workforce that has experienced trauma, illness and other barriers require a commitment to providing incisive and compassionate supervision from the very top down. Birenbaum also believes a commitment to consumer employment is best demonstrated when hiring happens within the organization, not just through referrals to outside businesses.

## Heartland Health Outreach – Chicago, Illinois

### *Employment Programming*

The values at the core of the Heartland Alliance's program areas are harm reduction, respecting human rights and dignity, a strengths-based orientation, using a trauma-informed approach, and embracing diversity. Heartland Health Outreach (HHO) is the HCH-funded health care arm of nonprofit Heartland Alliance. Though HHO does not provide employment-specific programming, it offers consumers job-skills development opportunities through its Psychosocial Rehabilitation program (PSR). Additionally, HHO's hiring practices integrate individuals with lived experience of homelessness or other barriers, like mental illness or substance abuse, into their workforce.

The PSR operates out of the Resource Center, an outpatient setting for individuals experiencing homelessness with diagnosed mental illnesses, many of whom also have histories of substance abuse. The PSR offers individuals access to meals, showers, and laundry facilities as well as supportive groups such as stress reduction, anger management, goal setting, and Dialectical Behavioral Therapy. For individuals who express interest, the PSR also offers job readiness classes including computer literacy, resume building and GED tutoring. Individuals who have gained stability and demonstrated good stress management skills may find an interest in serving as volunteer "Resource Center Associates" who help design menus and serve lunch to other consumers in the Resource Center. The PSR maintains openness to individuals' interests and desires to contribute. One individual, for example, provided free haircuts while she was obtaining her cosmetology license.

Positions at HHO that require lived experience are known as "prosumer" jobs. Prosumer jobs are designed for individuals who have experienced homelessness, mental illness or substance abuse (or a combination) and have sought care for these conditions. Prosumer job duties often involve sharing personal experience with current program participants. One prosumer, Paul Joseph, currently works in the Resource Center, and another conducts outreach around benefit eligibility and system navigation.

The HHO culture attracts individuals who have experienced the same barriers their clients face. Individuals may qualify for a position with HHO based on academic or professional expertise and later reveal their personal histories of homelessness or associated barriers like substance abuse or mental health issues. Business Operations Manager Ashley Allen has participated on several interview panels in which leading candidates disclose their personal history of homelessness. She reports anecdotal evidence that there are mental health practitioners, senior mental health staff and medical assistants who have experienced mental illness, substance abuse and homelessness.

### *Challenges and Policies*

Finding an individual who has lived experience and is also job-ready, according to Kelly Jones, Associate Director of Community and Specialty Services at HHO, can be challenging. Similar to CCC, another significant challenge for HHO involves maintaining boundaries. An employee with lived experience may have difficulty separating relationships or emotions that happen at work from his or her personal life. Jones alludes to a particular prosumer who worked well with participants, but outside of work took on several as a 12-step sponsor, creating potentially conflicting roles.

In part to ensure appropriate boundaries between employees and current consumers, company policy requires individuals to have discontinued receiving HHO services to qualify for employment there. The length of the separation period between status as consumer and eligibility for employment differs dependent on the program or department in which the individual is seeking work. This is best illustrated by the six-months an individual who has graduated from substance abuse treatment must wait before applying for an open position in the treatment program.

As with all HHO employees, regardless of job qualification or the personal experiences of individual employees, job performance is most essential. This is true if an employee in recovery experiences relapse: substance use or mental health relapses are relevant to supervisors only if they interfere with job performance. According to prosumer Paul Joseph, HHO supervisors understand the stress that accompanies working for an organization that provides direct service to homeless individuals. Depending on the impact of the problem on job function, supervisors may refer staff to EAP counselors in situations such as relapse.

Other factors that could obstruct an individual from employment, including a criminal history, do not impede most HHO job candidates. The HHO philosophy of care, according to Business Operations Manager Ashley Allen, embraces differences, which encourages job candidates to be honest about their backgrounds. The organization conducts background checks, as stipulated by funders, but focuses more on barriers overcome and strengths in job candidates.

### ***Impact of the Heartland Health Outreach Model***

Kelly Jones hears stories about individuals who, after completing HHO programs and gaining housing and stability, express an interest in becoming a counselor. These consumers appreciate the role HHO providers have played in their lives and strive to help others who are experiencing homelessness and other situations they once experienced. Jones says the example provided by prosumers demonstrates a new capacity for consumers who may feel overwhelmed by the prospect of looking for or gaining employment.

HHO's hiring practices nurture a diverse workforce through which the organization can offer distinctly personal services. "We have people from so many different walks of life, and that really contributes to a richer culture and understanding. Having people with lived experiences really helps us to understand the places our participants are coming from," says Allen. Paul Joseph has experience as a consumer of mental health services and facilitates groups in the PSR. Joseph brings an important perspective to the organization, which strives "to be of service to people who may have been treated rather harshly throughout much of their lives." It is a capacity, he admits, "that provides fulfillment." Having worked for the organization for thirteen years, Joseph has built strong relationships with his supervisor and others in HHO management, which enable him to serve as a bridge between consumers and staff.

### ***Lessons Learned***

Understanding the value that individuals with lived experience bring to the HHO system of care, Ashley Allen recognizes areas for growth. These include examining and identifying areas in the current program structure that could benefit from and build capacity for more prosumer positions. Both she and Joseph would like HHO to offer more support for new employees who may have lived experience with homelessness, mental illness, substance abuse, or a combination of these things. Allen would like to develop a formalized mentorship program so new employees can develop familiarity with their roles. While

expressing appreciation for the support HHO offers its employees, Paul Joseph would like to see a prosumer support meeting.

Allen believes other agencies should consider opening their hiring practices to individuals with lived experience. Kelly Jones understands the reluctance some organizations might feel in determining whether or not to hire consumers, but indicates that increasing workforce diversity should be a priority: “Not to take away from people with certain educational or work backgrounds, but you can really round out the table with people who have lived experiences.” Paul Joseph indicates that if an organization’s philosophy of care is open to the consumer perspective, they should consider shaping job opportunities around particular consumer strengths and interests.

## **Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program – Boston, MA**

### ***Employment Programming***

The Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program has been in place for 25 years, carrying out its mission “to provide or assure access to the highest quality health care for all homeless men, women and children in the greater Boston area.” Many BHCHP health care services are delivered to individuals in area homeless shelters, where BHCHP has satellite clinics. Though the Boston HCH program does not provide employment programming for its consumers in-house, its providers regularly refer individuals seeking employment to workforce training programs in the Boston community.

Similar to HHO, BHCHP offers certain positions and hires individuals with the stipulation that candidates have experienced homelessness; one such position is the BHCHP Community Health Worker. According to Program Director of Nursing and Associate Director of Clinical Operations Pooja Bhalla, consumers also fill front desk, housekeeping and kitchen positions. As with HHO and CCC, Bhalla reports that the organization seems to attract individuals with lived experience of or who are related to an individual who has experienced homelessness. They recently hired a nurse who disclosed her own history with homelessness after gaining the position.

### ***Challenges and Policies***

Because normal on-the-job stressors may feel more substantial for an employee who has experienced homelessness, BHCHP maintains a mentorship program through which these employees offer support to each other. Pooja Bhalla believes problems of work stress for employees with histories of homelessness are most effectively managed through direct, intentional supervision, a feature also mentioned by administrators at CCC. There are situations, such as relapse, she reports, when supervisors must take matters “very seriously.” As mentioned by HHO administrators, even in these instances, supervisors offer support to employees, including the opportunity to engage in substance abuse treatment. The goal in all such instances is to “make sure people can carry out their job functions in an effective and safe manner.”

In effort to prevent boundary problems between new employees and BHCHP medical staff, when an individual who has received services through BHCHP is hired, his or her medical care is transferred to an outside provider.

### ***Impact of the BHCHP Model***

BHCHP hiring practices provide opportunities not only for the individuals hired, but also for the staff of the entire agency. Bhalla says that watching individuals who have survived homelessness regain their livelihoods provides all staff inspiration to conduct “the highest quality work we could expect.” She indicates that the contribution of consumers helps BHCHP hold all of its work to a higher standard.

### ***Lessons Learned***

As mentioned by CCC and HHO staff, the BHCHP model includes formal, intentional supervision, which is especially important for employees who have experienced homelessness. According to Bhalla, “You have to check in regularly and see where things are at. If you get ahead of what the challenges are, you can face them more easily.” Expectations and a sense of trust develop out of this structured supervisory approach, allowing employees to more readily address potential challenges with supervisors. Understanding the important role employment plays in addressing homelessness and health, management at BHCHP would like to incorporate more employment development programming into its services, according to Bhalla.

## **Harbor Homes, Inc. – Nashua, NH**

### ***Background and Employment Programming***

Harbor Homes is the lead agency in the Partnership for Successful Living, a collaborative of six nonprofit organizations that offer solutions to homelessness and poverty. The organizations offer programs including affordable housing with support services, a community health center, mental health and behavioral health care, workforce development and employment assistance, case management, veteran services and homeless prevention services. Each of the organizations plays a unique role in accomplishing the overarching mission, an approach which recognizes the complex and overlapping factors that lead to and perpetuate the cycle of poverty and homelessness. Consumers have access to all applicable services.

Harbor Homes’ employment programming connects clients to jobs in the community and within the organization itself. Currently, there are two employment programs: the Employment Services Program and the Veterans FIRST Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program. Following the design of Supported Employment and, like CCC, the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model, Peter Kelleher, Harbor Homes CEO, cites the effectiveness of the ESP in assisting individuals who have experienced chronic homelessness and associated barriers. With IPS as a guide, staff treat each consumer as an individual with unique needs, interests, and strengths. ESP clients earn income while learning new skills and gaining confidence needed to obtain employment. ESP staff develop relationships with local employers that can support job matches for ESP clients. The staff also maintain contact with clients once jobs have been secured, to make sure the job remains a good fit. The Veterans FIRST program applies the same level of individualized support in assisting homeless veterans in gaining and maintaining employment in the community.

Internal job opportunities are accessible to Harbor Homes clients. One avenue clients may pursue is the Personal Care Service Provider (PCSP) training, which is offered through partner agency Healthy at Home. Healthy at Home provides skilled nursing and other critical services to New Hampshire residents with a disability and who require ongoing care, but wish to live at home. The PCSP program is a seven week class that teaches individuals medical terminology, range of motion, how to dress and undress a person who is



paralyzed, how to care for someone receiving oxygen, breathing techniques, nutrition, home maintenance and meal preparation. They also become certified in CPR. Generally, people are hired as PCSPs after completing this course, either at Healthy at Home or other health care facilities in the surrounding community.

Clients may learn about job opportunities within the organization through the ESP. Kelleher reports that the organization has hired consumers for everything from property maintenance personnel to outreach specialists to finance and development officers. One example: individuals who have participated in and graduated from Harbor Homes' substance-abuse treatment program, known as Keystone Hall, are hired as peer recovery specialists.

### ***Challenges and Policies***

Like other organizations profiled here, Harbor Homes views issues typically considered barriers to employment in other environments nonjudgmentally. To assist individuals lacking specific job experience, the organization provides training. If an individual experiences a relapse that interferes with his or her job, supervisors work to develop a system that supports that individual's work and performance continues, according to Kelleher. Harbor Homes borrows from the "Club House" model, in which an employer contracts with the organization to provide temporary employment opportunities. If necessary, a peer may temporarily replace an individual who experienced a relapse or other complication until the individual is prepared to return to work. If it appears necessary, employees are also encouraged to seek assistance, including services offered through the substance abuse and mental health treatment programs.

Both Kelleher and consumer employee Matt Milbourn cite systemic factors as greater obstacles than personal challenges. Kelleher reports the unavailability of jobs that pay adequately and provide benefits as factors that challenge Harbor Homes clients. "We're seeing how painful trying to access employment is. So many have given up in despair." According to Kelleher, because of external circumstances, Harbor Homes strives to offer clients hope and opportunities as they come available.

Additionally, Milbourn recognizes the powerful impact public perception has on those experiencing homelessness. He indicates that shame associated with homelessness may prevent individuals from seeking assistance. Having previously had a profitable job, he admits that his personal experience required him to "suck up" his pride before he could ask for help.

There are few requirements for employment at Harbor Homes; individuals with a history of substance abuse must have at least one year in recovery. Kelleher indicates the individualized attention given to Harbor Homes clients builds trusting relationships that decrease the need for excessive rules and regulations. Because of the intensity of the work, however, extensive training, including on boundaries, HIPPA, and other topics, is standard and required for each new employee.

### ***Impact of the Harbor Homes Model***

Of the 350 Harbor Homes employees, approximately 35 are consumers, and the knowledge and expertise they bring to the job is educational for other staff. Harbor Homes employs consumers in Community Health Worker and Outreach positions, which, according to Kelleher, allow the organization to better connect with people who are trying to access its services.

Matt Milbourn experienced homelessness after losing his job as a truck driver and exhausting his resources assisting his daughter with a substance dependence problem. Frustrated by his fruitless attempts to help his family and his subsequent material losses, Matt hit "rock bottom." A veteran, he accessed resources through the local VA program, which eventually connected him to the Veterans FIRST program at Harbor Homes. Matt took advantage of an opportunity to return to school and earn a business degree. He found himself back at Harbor Homes, this time as an employee teaching computer classes to veterans experiencing homelessness. When offered a case-manager position, Matt thought, "What better way to return a favor that was done for me than to help other guys who are in the same position I was in?" He expresses gratitude and happiness and says, "I love what I am doing."

### ***Lessons Learned***

Peter Kelleher wishes his organization could hire a larger number of consumers, especially into finance and administrative positions. Offering job opportunities that pay a living wage is an important goal. Credit for the Harbor Homes employment programming, according to Kelleher, belongs to a board member who challenged others to recognize the role work plays in changing lives, and provided funding for these programs. Kelleher recommends organizations seek out similar champions for employment to serve on boards in their communities. As Matt Milbourn explains, "You helped somebody when no one else would, so you created an asset. How you win in business is by how many assets you have."

## **Mesilla Valley Community of Hope – Las Cruces, NM**

### ***Employment Programming***

Mesilla Valley Community of Hope (MVCH) is an alliance of homeless service agencies that also operates as a housing provider, incorporating transitional and permanent housing programs, a "tent city", a day shelter, and a resource room. MVCH partner agencies include a soup kitchen and emergency food program, a child care facility, and St. Luke's Health Care Clinic. Though employment support is not offered programmatically, outreach and case-management staff serve individuals who are involved in part-time and day-labor job opportunities. Executive Director Nicole Martinez says part of the MVCH vision includes programming to offer employment classes and referrals to outside job opportunities.

Martinez reports that practices which involve hiring individuals who have experienced homelessness are not based on an organizational policy at MVCH. In fact, there is no preference for individuals with particular experiences, though she says, "We've just found it's something that's very beneficial to both our clients and our organization."

One commonality among individuals who move from consumer to employee is that most begin as volunteers. Volunteer opportunities are posted in the MVCH lobby, and clients also learn about positions from others who are volunteering. In a volunteer capacity, individuals who may have experienced chronic homelessness can learn basic job skills and develop rapport with staff. As paid positions come available, staff encourage volunteers who may be experiencing or have experienced homelessness to apply. Martinez reports that gaining employment and a job title empowers individuals to make decisions that lead to exiting homelessness. Positions in which consumers currently volunteer include front desk, resource room and

outreach staff. Out of fifteen total staff, four individuals who experienced homelessness are currently employed as outreach specialists, residential managers and case managers.

### ***Challenges and Policies***

As with employees at the other organizations reported here, MVCH consumers who become employees confront challenges with boundaries. This may occur when a new employee encounters acquaintances still experiencing homelessness and old friends question his or her credibility. Martinez describes employees' experiences of homelessness as a "double-edged sword": it is conducive to developing rapport with consumers, but also exposes them to peer pressure to treat individuals differently based on familiarity.

Matt Mercer, an employee at MVCH, manages Camp Hope, a tent city program operated by MVCH where he lived prior to his employment. When he was first hired, Matt was required to read the MVCH policy manual, which describes expectations around and sets boundaries for the employee-client relationship. Though the rules were explained clearly, Matt felt a degree of internal conflict over how to interact with people with whom he once shared the experience of homelessness. He explains that he feels fortunate, that he has an "open door" relationship with his supervisor, Nicole, who helps him process his experiences and maintain his boundaries.

Martinez explains that MVCH holds an orientation for all new employees and volunteers to explain confidentiality, boundaries and policies that address drug and alcohol use and potential personnel conflicts.

### ***Impact of the MVCH Model***

Through its hiring practices, MVCH experiences several benefits. By providing an income, which enables individuals to afford housing, Nicole Martinez explains that MVCH is accomplishing its goal of "getting individuals off of the streets." Additionally, those employees who have experienced homelessness offer an understanding to clients that other employees are not equipped to provide. They also serve as models of success, demonstrating to people who may feel disheartened and uncertain that secure housing is possible. Martinez says MVCH's hiring practices reflect a belief that "everyone has potential. People who are given the opportunity to shine typically do so. We value offering that to people."

When asked about the organization's values, Matt Miller indicates that through volunteer opportunities and hiring practices, MVCH involves people in a way that helps give them responsibility: "I think our agency makes it a real point that we're not just here doing this stuff for you, you have to help us do this stuff." Overall, Miller says the philosophy and hiring practices at MVCH give the organization credibility and validates that "the work we do transforms lives."

### ***Lessons Learned***

Both Martinez and Miller support volunteerism as an effective first step to engage consumers in work opportunities. Demonstrating a commitment to job duties and learning and demonstrating new skills can help the prospective employee and supervisor develop a relationship that supports entry into a paid position. Organizations should also develop an understanding of the experience of homelessness: based on feedback from consumers, whether through organizational advisory boards, boards of directors, focus groups or surveys, agency management can better learn how to manage and supervise employees who have experienced homelessness.

## **Interfaith House – Chicago, IL**

### ***Employment Programming***

A medical respite care provider, Interfaith House offers individuals experiencing homelessness and medical recovery needs an environment in which to recuperate and gain stability and self-sufficiency, which involves income and paid employment for some residents. Jennifer Nelson, Interfaith House Executive Director, says the Alvin Baum employment project helps individuals develop resumes, interview, and customer service skills. After completing the five-week program, individuals participate in internships as phone operators, kitchen assistants or in housekeeping, all in-house on a voluntary basis. Nelson reports that depending on openings, Interfaith strives to provide in-house job opportunities to residents who have completed the Alvin Baum project. More frequently, Interfaith case-managers network and link residents with agencies that provide workforce development services. Interfaith refers clients to Job Corps, which provides specific training opportunities, such as certification as a nurse's assistant. There is also Inspiration Café, a 12-week program that provides job placement opportunities.

### ***Challenges and Policies***

Like the other agencies profiled here, Interfaith House also contends with the often challenging dynamic of the employee-client relationship. Executive Director Nelson reflects on both the strengths and challenges of having consumers on the Interfaith workforce: "they know the situation, walk the walk, and talk the talk. But their experiences may lead to assumptions about a resident's intentions and overly critical, unfair treatment of residents." To address boundary issues, supervisors provide intensive supervision regularly. The agency holds an all-staff meeting every two months to review harassment, boundaries and other issues. Nelson admits, "It's a constant training." Through supervision, all employees must meet performance measures, a process which provides learning opportunities and assists in behavior change.

The agency must also contend with systemic challenges, which include potential employers who deny applications based on criminal histories or homeless status. Nelson indicates a lack of job opportunities is a concern she and Interfaith clients face.

### ***Impact of the Interfaith Model***

Jennifer Nelson echoes Harbor Homes' Matt Milbroun by indicating that offering job opportunities provides consumers an opportunity to reciprocate the care they received from the organization. Similar to MVCH, she also feels that the hiring practice is consistent with Interfaith's efforts to help people rebuild their lives. Individuals who received services and now are employed at the organization also provide invaluable public relations when foundations or donors express an interest in Interfaith.

### ***Lessons Learned***

Despite programming designed to help individuals secure housing and regain health, Interfaith faces the reality that without income, safe, affordable housing is scarce. Residents without a reliable source of income cannot pay a lease, but finding a sustainable job, even for able-bodied individuals, is a challenge. Facing multiple barriers, Interfaith House strives to incorporate employment into its programming in an intentional way.

Through the Alvin Baum project, Interfaith House provides residents an opportunity to focus on employment. Funding for the program relies on the investment of an Interfaith House donor who, as with the Harbor Homes supporter, brings attention to employment as a key factor in gaining self-sufficiency.

## Promising Practices

Exploring practices and policies that directly impact the employment of homeless health center consumers reveals a diversity of environments and health center characteristics. Despite the variances, several characteristics emerged as promising practices for health centers focused on employment programming. These factors arose both as direct programming practices and indirect organizational cultures that promote consumer employment:

Senior leadership understands and supports employment programming. Three health center executive directors (or CEOs) demonstrated their investment by participating directly in interviews for this project. Two organizations cited input from consumers through Consumer Advisory Boards or other mechanisms (e.g. surveys, consumer board members) as critical to the development of employment programming. Several administrators and one consumer employee interviewed indicated the most effective approach to supporting employment for health center consumers is to hire within, onto the health center workforce. For many consumers, issues including a criminal record and lack of job history deter or obstruct a successful job search. Health centers that hire individuals who have experienced homelessness incorporate flexible hiring procedures that do not screen out applicants with these traditional barriers.

Organizations recognize the role of employment as a solution to homelessness. There are multiple causes and effects of homelessness, with lack of income central among them. For many health center consumers, affecting change means finding stable employment. All organizations that participated in this project recognize the importance of employment in changing the lives of health center consumers.

“Intensive” supervision is fundamental. Administrators see the value of understanding the special needs of employees with histories of homelessness and related concerns such as mental health and substance abuse. Based on this awareness, they create a culture of sharing knowledge of homelessness with management and they institute compassionate and incisive supervision. Though it may require extra work by management, administrators indicate regular supervision that expresses concern and support for employees who have experienced homelessness is vital; among other things, it establishes trusting workplace relationships that facilitate open communication about managing stress on the job. In this setting an employee may more readily disclose issues such as substance abuse or mental health relapses. More than one administrator reported offering resources like an Employment Assistance Counselor or substance abuse treatment. Importantly, administrators indicated that regardless of employee background or outside-of-work concerns, supervision is designed to support optimal workplace performance. Only to the extent that outside-of-work behaviors interfere with job performance or that employees report them as concerns, do supervisors address such behaviors.

Basic skills training is a critical first step for some individuals who have been away from the workforce for long periods of time. Three organizations reported providing either a basic skills curriculum or volunteer opportunities to reintroduce consumers to basic employment skills. Such skills include timeliness, interview

and communication skills. Volunteering was suggested as a method to acquaint individuals with job skills, an opportunity to demonstrate dependability and for both parties to assess whether a particular job is a good fit.

Individualized Placement and Support is a preferred modality. Through an IPS lens, staff treat each client as an individual with unique needs, interests and strengths, help find jobs that match skills and as much as possible, follow clients after they have been hired to make sure job is a good fit. IPS is based on the theory that the best way to foster self-sufficiency for people with mental illness is to help them gain rapid entry into the competitive labor market while providing supportive services, such as one-on-one job coaching, on-the-job training and credentialing, mental health treatment, and ongoing reassessment to identify and address emerging barriers.<sup>3</sup>

The boundaries issue is salient. All health centers reported having to address boundaries issues between employees who had been consumers and current health center clients. Several administrators pointed to their intensive supervision practices as a way to allow employees to process and mitigate potential boundary problems. Two health centers reported specific approaches: one refers newly hired consumers to another provider for health care services; the other only hires individuals who have received services from an outside provider. Most administrators also reported providing in-depth trainings and orientation for all new hires with a module dedicated to boundary issues.

An “Employment Champion” on the agency board of directors brings focus to the issue. Two health centers credit benefactors who urged their organization to focus on helping health center consumers find employment. Both of these organizations offer job training programs which administrators admit could not occur without the funding and attention brought by these individuals.

## Conclusion

Organizations can take a variety of approaches to support employment opportunities for their consumers, from programming that focuses on employment skill development and links consumers to employment opportunities in the community to creating employment opportunities for consumers within organizations. In each approach, organizational culture and values play a vital role. The value of employment as a key strategy to ending homelessness and increasing autonomy is communicated from executives down to front desk staff. These approaches enable consumers to play a unique role in carrying out agency missions. Their personal experience serves as a unique bridge between individuals receiving services and those providing them. As Matt Milbourn from Harbor Homes said, employees with lived experience of homelessness are living “assets”: evidence of the power of the organization in changing lives.

The challenges agencies face in supporting employment for consumers occur both externally and within the organization. The job market does not readily provide living wage entry-level opportunities. While not assuring a living wage job, the IPS approach increases the likelihood that job opportunities match an individual’s interests, skills and needs. Once an individual is hired, employment counselors then follow-up to assess job suitability.

Providing job opportunities within organizations comes with another set of challenges, requiring personnel policies and practices that acquaint (or reacquaint) individuals with basic job skills, clearly define workplace

boundaries, and offer support through required trainings and regular supervision. The potential to successfully employ individuals who may have been unemployed for years, many of whom have contended with substance abuse or problems associated with mental illnesses, increases with regularly scheduled, focused supervision. In the health care and homeless services field(s), this kind of intensive supervision appears even more vital to employee success. By fostering a sense of trust and reliability, it offers employees with lived experience a setting which is amenable to frank disclosure about challenges that could interfere with job performance. Just as important, there must be clarity on other side of the supervisor-employee dynamic: organizations that hire consumers should provide supervision that, regardless of employee circumstance or background, reinforces job performance as the primary concern. In the event that an employee experiences a personal challenge, whether around substance use, mental illness or something else, supervisors assess the issue only by its impact on job performance. As with all other employees, in those instances in which an employee experiences a personal challenge that impacts work, the supervisor offers support, which may be a referral to the Employee Assistance Provider, or when indicated, other resources.

Meeting the challenge of unemployment among HCH consumers requires organizations to see it as a social determinant that must be addressed to effectively fulfill their missions. In practical terms, this entails identifying funding and possibly a willingness to prioritize workforce development programs. Identifying a "Workforce Champion" to guide organizational boards toward employment programming appears to be an effective strategy.

## Interviews

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Bhalla, P. (2014, January 14). Chief Operating Officer, Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program. (B. Zralek, Interviewer)

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