

## *Ten Principles That Support Effective Mental Health Employment Programs*

Work is the best way to integrate the social, emotional, self-worth and economic needs of people in our society. Community employment contributes to a person's financial stability, security and independence in a way that cannot be achieved if the person has to depend on others, including government agencies, for their livelihood. This is particularly apparent for people who experience severe and persistent mental health issues and have endured years of unemployment, poverty and rejection.

While work can satisfy many of our needs, for people with mental illness, many supports will be necessary, including, housing, transportation, medical treatment and psychosocial supports. Effective employment programs must integrate consumer needs, services and supports into a coherent delivery system. While effective programs may be structure differently, and managed from various points of view, most rely on a shared set of principles that help assure their success.

Many of the following ten principles will be consistently applied in the more effective employment program for people who experience severe and persistent mental illness.

1. **Community Partnerships** – Build community partnerships and consensus with agencies, employers and community supports. Look to day programs, shelters, faith-based groups, and local mental health providers to be the focal point by which the various groups can coordinate services on behalf of each consumer. The entity that provides housing or day services is a natural place through which partnerships and collaboration can occur.
2. **Long-term Supports** – Plan for Long-term support because of the cyclical nature of mental illness. Face-to-face communication and encouragement are necessary in preparing for work. Support will be needed at the worksite and off the worksite during non-work hours. Peer support can be extremely effective in helping a consumer prepare for, obtain, and maintain employment.
3. **Belief In Work** – Establish among all partners and service providers an unwavering belief that with support people with mental illness can be productive workers. This must be a shared belief and modeled by staff. Create a natural sense of hope for the consumer.
4. **Consumer Choice** – Respect a consumers desire to choose to work and be independent. Provide opportunity for continuous consumer input. The consumer should be involved, engaged and develop a strong sense of ownership for their employment goal. Provide complete information to the consumer so they can make decisions that best meet their needs, interests and abilities.
5. **Integration of Services** – Integrate services and supports through a shared philosophy, clear communication and agreed upon goals. Since employment will depend on the services and supports of more than one partner, a clear understanding of an agreed upon approach is critical.

6. **Real Work** – Create opportunities for real work. Work should be community based, competitive, in a normalized setting, involving multiple employers that can lead to increased financial stability and security. As much as possible provide employment experiences in the natural work setting – not sheltered settings.
7. **Flexibility** – Assure that services and supports are flexible. This is critical because of the cyclical nature of mental illness. Traditional employment programs place a heavy emphasis on being “work ready”. Mental health employment programs need to be flexible and start employment opportunities at the lead of the consumer, perhaps before they would be considered “work ready”. People who experience mental illness may do better with a place and support model rather than a traditional train and place model.
8. **Employer Needs** – Respond to employers needs. Employers have a right to expect an employee to do a good job. Even though consumers may require reasonable accommodation, employers should not be expected to hire a consumer out of sympathy. If the consumer does not meet the employer’s requirements, reasonable accommodations should be considered. Thus, finding another way to meet the employer’s needs. If the consumer is not the right match for the job other work opportunities should be considered.
9. **Consumer Needs** – Structure continuous evaluation and planning into your program. Meaningful work must be built on the broad range of interests, concerns, desires and abilities of the consumer. Continually evaluating and planning with the consumer will assure that their changing needs and concerns are being met.

**Developmental Model** – Establish a program build on a developmental philosophy. If provided the right support, consumers will learn through practice, reinforcement of skill and responsibilities, which will lead to real work expectations. The model must support the belief that consumers can develop and change in ways that will lead to successful employment.

***Developed by the Employment Team of the Behavioral Health Reform Strategic Planning Effort***

***Nebraska Health and Human Services System***

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