Mental Health Sufferers Find Niche in Workforce through Supported Employment Programs

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About Mrs. McCarthy

As Employment Specialist, Mrs. McCarthy is responsible for the development and implementation of vocational and employment services at the Lindner Center of HOPE. Mrs. McCarthy serves patients, who are utilizing the Center's inpatient and outpatient services, across the age spectrum. Mrs. McCarthy works with patients to discover their dreams, skills, training, experience, education and potential obstacles, helping them to identify the possibilities. She also works as part of the treatment team so she may understand how the patient functions. In her role, Mrs. McCarthy will work with the patient on interview skills, she will help in the job search and she is available as a liaison to ensure effective communication happens between employee and employer.

Mrs. McCarthy is a veteran in rehabilitation and vocation services. Most recently Mrs. McCarthy served as Team Leader of Psychiatric Rehabilitation and Community Integration for the Mental Health and Recovery Services of Clinton County in Lebanon, Ohio. While there she managed many people, including, group leaders, housing specialists, vocational specialists and peer support specialists in both the Warren and Clinton county offices. She also developed employment sites in the community and established community relations on behalf of clients in both counties as well.

Mrs. McCarthy is a member of the National Rehabilitation Association, the Ohio Rehabilitation Association, the Southwest Ohio Rehabilitation Association, and the American Counseling Association. She has also served on numerous professional committees.

Summary:

Finding suggests more than half of individuals with mental illnesses want to work, but fear doing so would result in losing their federal health care benefits. A number of state and private health clinics have started supported employment programs with the goal of getting more people with mental illnesses in the workforce. This article focuses on supported employment programs and some of the issues employed individuals with mental illnesses face in regard to federal health care benefits.

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More than 60 percent of people with a mental illness do not work. Yet, as much as 70 percent of these individuals want a job, according to a Health Affairs article. While there are federal work programs in place, their effectiveness in finding employment for people with mental illnesses is worse than any other disability group. As a result, 13 states and several private mental health centers have taken the initiative by implementing what are known as supported employment programs.

Shown to be the most effective method of helping people gain employment, supported employment programs assist individuals diagnosed with mental illnesses find jobs fitting their needs and interests. These programs specialize in finding participants "competitive employment," which are jobs open to anyone in the community. Working in conjunction with a team of mental health workers, employment specialists aim to help their clients find work as quickly as possible without having to take assessments or lengthy pre-training sessions. Employment specialists locate employment for clients by networking with employers and colleges in the community.

Additional aspects of most supported employment programs include:
- Crafting goal-oriented plans highlighting an individual's interests, strengths, abilities and needs.
- Fully integrating mental health and vocational rehabilitation services.
- Providing employment opportunities tailored to each client that are flexible in schedule.
- Providing job placement assistance to anyone interested in the service.

Studies show supported employment programs have significantly higher competitive job placement rates than traditional vocational services for clients of all ages and mental health backgrounds. Additionally, supported employment clients adhering to a steady work schedule have been shown to have enhanced self-esteem and improvements to their quality of life. While these clients still rely on federal health care benefits for support, studies show their reliance on mental health services are less.

Challenges
Despite their success, the presence of supported employment programs in the United States is relatively small due to budgeting shortfalls in most states. However, a recent study from Dartmouth College suggests a national support employment system would help the government save as much as $360 million, citing research showing people with mental illness tend to require less treatment when employed.

Another challenge is the fact that many people with mental health illnesses choose to remain jobless out of fear for losing federally-funded healthcare benefits such as Medicaid. Those with mental health disorders that do work usually limit their schedule to 20 hours a week to prevent losing their federal benefits.

Many proponents of supported employment contend that a federally-backed program allowing people with mental health illnesses to retain their Medicaid coverage would be a win-win situation for all involved parties. Encouraging more individuals with mental disorders to join the workforce will enhance their well-being and reduce their reliance on health services, cutting down Federal health care spending in the process, according to the Dartmouth study. Research also contends that having more individuals with mental illnesses who are competent for employment in the workforce would help stimulate the economy; not only boosting revenue for the government, but helping ailing businesses as well.

Sources:

Health Affairs. *Social Security And Mental Illness: Reducing Disability With Supported Employment.* Retrieved on December 1, 2010 from http://tdi.dartmouth.edu/documents/publications/HA%20Mental%20Health%20--%20Drake,%20Skinner.pdf