

FOCUS GROUP ON EMPLOYMENT WITH PERSONS WITH MENTAL ILLNESS



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Two focus groups were held with people with mental illness regarding employment issues. One focus group included those who were currently unemployed. Another focus group was held with those who had been employed. The following is a summary of the findings.

Focus Group of those Who are Unemployed:

- Reasons given for not currently working included loss of benefits, need for support services, stigma of mental illness, medication issues, lack of training and skills, and work-related issues.
- The group members listed barriers to working: illness-related, knowledge about employment situations, sheltered workshops, and not getting to keep most of their pay check.
- They had held a number of jobs in the blue-collar area, white collar positions, and food-related.
- They wanted jobs in fields where they would help others and in blue collar situations.
- The assistance they need included more training, assistance from others, help with their medications, and job-related help.
- Obstacles faced in previous employment included discrimination, fear of getting fired, no insurance or it was too expensive to afford, problems with Section 8 housing, and not able to get a bank deposit box.
- Others can help by having an understanding employer and having some work adjustments.

Focus Group of those Who are Employed:

- Barriers to seeking work included issues related to their illness and those that were job-related.
- The type of jobs they currently held fit into two categories: food service and blue collar work.
- They would like to do the type of work that they were doing.
- How to improve work situation suggestions were more training, having a job coach, and having some components of the job adjusted.

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INTRODUCTION

In May of 2007, focus groups were held with persons with mental illness focusing on employment issues. One focus group was held with persons who are currently unemployed. Another focus group was held with those who were currently employed. This report describes the findings from these focus groups.

FOCUS GROUP FOR THOSE WHO ARE UNEMPLOYED

The first group included thirteen people with mental illness who are currently unemployed. They responded to questions about (1) why they were not currently seeking employment, (2) the barriers they had encountered, (3) the types of work they had done in the past, (4) the types of work they felt they were most suited for, (5) strategies to assist in employment, (6) obstacles faced when employed, and (7) assistance needed to maintain employment. This section presents the results to these questions.

Reasons Not Working Now:

There were a number of reasons why the focus group members were not employed at this time. The reasons were quite varied. Some of the themes follow.

Loss of Benefits:

As in the survey responses, loss of benefits was a prominent feature. For one it was fear of losing Medicaid. Another mentioned Social Security and Medicare.

Support Services:

Two factors auxiliary to working were cited: (1) transportation and (2) having proper clothing (which this person could not afford).

Stigma of Mental Illness:

Three individuals saw a stigma of being mentally ill from those in the workplace. One person just noted this stigma. Two other people noted that employers don't understand mental health problems.

Medications:

The medication side effects affected two persons. For one it was the fact that it made me slower. For the other it makes me tired with poor bladder control.

Training and Skills:

The lack of training and/or skills was cited. One person did not have a high school diploma. Another described not having qualifications to work. Still a third had trouble with reading.

Work-Related Issues:

For one person, being slow affected their ability to work. For another, it was the stress of a job that hindered employment.

Miscellaneous:

There were many responses that did not fit into the themes above.

- Supervisor watched me but did not do any work himself;
- Several people were disabled due to health problems as well as physical problems;

- It's hard to get a job if you haven't worked for a long time – hard to know what to say when there are gaps in my work history.
- Guardians say I can't work;
- Can't do anything that's interesting; and
- As a female, they gave me a man's job with no breaks and no lunch.

Barriers to Seeking Work:

There were a number of perceived barriers to seeking work. Some of these themes are listed herein.

Illness-Related:

Some responses were related to either a physical or mental illness. One person mentioned a heart condition. Another described a situation where they had to take early retirement because my doctor was not willing to change my medications. Another medication issue related to not being able to take my medications on the job. Finally, there was a response that indicated that this person had too many doctor appointments.

Knowledge about Employment Situations:

Two individuals replied that there was some lack of knowledge about finding employment. For one it was that they did not know where to go to look. Another stated that they did not have a resume.

Workshops:

Two people worked in sheltered workshops. They were not happy with this situation. One person said the workshops pay you 19 cents per hour and are very boring. Even then you may not get into vocational rehabilitation programs even if you go through the workshop. This was a requirement for entering vocational rehabilitation. The other person that she made \$13 in two weeks at the workshop.

Not Keeping Pay Check:

Not being able to keep their pay check was another response. For one, it was the guardian who took the pay check. For another, the State takes half your pay check.

Miscellaneous:

There were miscellaneous responses:

- Feel too old;
- Only jobs available are janitorial or busboy;
- Don't pay us as much as someone without a mental illness; and
- Must have the will to work.

Work Previously Done:

Many of the attendees to this focus group had worked in the past. The type of work they had done has been summarized.

Blue Collar Jobs:

The highest percent had worked at blue collar jobs. These included (1) working in a warehouse, (2) making train tires, (3) janitorial work, (4) housekeeping, (5) putting trees on semis, (6) worked in greenhouse, (7) assembled doors and windows, (8) stacked feed, (9) cleaned church.

White Collar Jobs:

There were some white collar jobs. These included (1) telemarketing, (2) clerical, and (3) worked in retail.

Food--Related Jobs:

Two individuals worked at some type of hospital job. For one it was a dishwasher and the other was a nurse's aid.

Miscellaneous:

One person was a student and the other worked in child care.

Types of Work Feel Most Suited For:

The next question asked what type of work do you feel most suited for? There were nine responses to this question.

Helping Others:

One person wanted to help others. The second person stated that they would like to be an advocate.

Blue Collar Jobs:

As with the types of jobs that these participants had held, some felt they were most suited to blue collar jobs. These included janitor, cleaning, garbage collector, cab driver and painter.

Miscellaneous:

There was one response that did not fit into the above categories. This was a person who felt they were best suited to be an artist.

Assistance in Obtaining Employment:

To the question, what would make it feasible for you to get employment; there were a number of responses.

More Training:

Two individuals wanted more training. For one, it was more education. The other wanted training in higher education.

Assistance from Others:

A number of participants wanted some form of assistance from others. These included (1) help from others, (2) a mentor, (3) assistance from my case manager, (4) resume writing, and (5) interviewing skills.

Illness-Related:

One individual asked for good medications. The other wanted to stay out of the hospital.

Job-Related Assistance:

Two responses indicated some assistance on the job. For one, it was working for a small business that has more time for me. The other person wanted people on the job that were friendly.

Miscellaneous:

There were a number of miscellaneous responses:

- Stable living environment;
- If they did not take away benefits;
- Not volunteer work – need to get paid;

- Gradually reintroduce work – not start with full-time; and
- If I were motivated to do the job.

Obstacles Faced when Previously Employed:

Only five responses were given to this category. They were:

- Discrimination;
- Fear of getting fired;
- No insurance or too expensive;
- With Section 8 – cannot have over \$1,000 in assets; and
- Was told could not have a safe deposit box in a bank.

How Others could Help you Remain Employed:

To the question, what could others do to make keeping employment realistic for you? There were seven responses. These have been summarized below.

Employer-Related:

One person suggested that having an understanding employer would help. For another it was having an employer who will let you return to work after you have been sick or in the hospital. A third mentioned incentives for employers.

Work-Adjustments:

Two participants suggested work adjustment. For one, work where you can set your own hours. Another needed a slower placed job. They noted that they could not keep up.

Miscellaneous:

There were two miscellaneous responses:

- Stop discriminating because of mental illness, and
- Need enough to make a living – like \$1,000 – Otherwise; I would be better off staying on SSDI at \$800 per month.

FOCUS GROUP FOR THOSE WHO ARE EMPLOYED

A second focus group was held for persons with mental illness who were currently employed. There were seven participants in this focus group. This section of the report describes the findings.

Barriers to Seeking Work

The first question related to barriers these individuals had encountered in seeking employment. The themes for this item are summarized herein.

Illness Related:

Three individuals noted some type of illness that was an obstacle. For one it was an operation. The second got sick and had too many doctor appointments. Finally, one person noted that their mental illness interfered with the job search.

Job Related:

There were some job-related responses. For one, the lack of experience was an issue. Another described not being able to keep up. Finally, one person noted overworking myself in the past.

Miscellaneous:

Some answers did not fit into the two above themes.

- Don't know how to create a resume and
- Lack of transportation.

Types of Work Held in the Past:

The group provided a list of the type of employment they had held in the past. Some people gave more than one response.

Food Service:

There were three food service types of jobs. These were food server, dishwasher, and cook.

Blue Collar Jobs:

The majority of the jobs listed fell into the blue collar category. These included (1) welding BBQ grills; (2) polishing cars; (3) cashier at a gas station; (4) assembly line work; (5) janitorial; (6) stocking; and (7) garbage collection.

Miscellaneous:

Two jobs did not fit into the above categories. These were teacher and Meals on Wheels in the summer.

Type of Work Most Suited For:

The type of work that the participants felt they were best suited for was another item. These were similar to what had been given above.

Food Service:

The individuals, who had been dishwasher, cook, and server mentioned these positions.

Blue Collar Jobs:

There were some blue collar jobs mentioned, some different than had been previously stated. These included painter, cashier, working on mini-bikes, nursing assistant in a nursing home, and tree nursery work.

Miscellaneous:

Some jobs mentioned did not fit within the above categories. These included working with children, being a manager or at least having promotional opportunities, newscaster and massage therapist.

What Could Improve Work Situation:

There were a myriad of responses to the question “What could we do to improve your work situation”. The basic themes follow:

Training:

Some wanted more training. For one it was get a better degree. For another further my education.

Job Related:

There were some job-related responses. For one it was proper accessibility – if I need a walker. Another did not always want to be on my feet. A break offered on time was yet another response. Finally, there was the response need help with keeping up with the workload.

Job Coach:

One person wanted a job coach. Another requested someone to check on me.

Miscellaneous:

There were some responses that did not fit within other themes. These included:

- Offer more money
- Promote me to management;
- Offer exercise program;
- Work with co-workers to understand mental illness;
- Education of probation officers; and
- Lower level of medication.