

IPS Supported Employment for

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors

This document is intended to provide information about IPS supported employment for Vocational Rehabilitation counselors. Vocational Rehabilitation counselors often work with community rehabilitation providers who help people with serious mental illnesses return to work. Some of these agencies may be using the evidence-based practice of IPS supported employment which is unlike other types of supported employment programs. IPS has been well-researched. In fact, multiple research trials have demonstrated that people who participate in IPS are two to three times more likely to obtain employment than those who participate in other types of employment programs. IPS supported employment programs follow the eight practice principles outlined below:

Every person who wants to work is eligible for IPS. Research has demonstrated that desire to work helps people overcome possible barriers such as symptoms from mental illness, co-occurring substance use disorders, problems with personal presentation, and so forth.

“It is important to meet people where they are and help them by offering hope, information, and resources. The zero exclusion policy of IPS does just that. It allows the employment specialist and the mental health team to start working with consumers to remove barriers and that frees me to focus on helping my client with employment.”

– Holly Heaven, Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitation Services

Employment services are integrated with mental health treatment. Employment specialists meet weekly with mental health practitioners to think of strategies to help people with their employment goals. VR counselors are also encouraged to work closely with the team.

“I meet frequently with mental health therapists and employment specialists. I talk to clients about the meetings to explain that they are likely to get better services, more supportive services, if everyone on their team is on the same page with how they are doing and what they want and need. I have never had a client say that he or she didn’t like that idea.”

– LaNay Koralesky, Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development

Competitive employment is the goal. IPS focuses on jobs in the community that anyone can apply for, regardless of disability status. IPS clients working in these jobs earn the same wages as their co-workers. The jobs do not have artificial time limits.

“This is consistent with the Vocational Rehabilitation mission and purpose. Contemporary VR practice discourages sheltered employment, transitional employment, or in-house work teams as acceptable work outcomes.”

– Gene Oulvey, Illinois Department of Rehabilitation Services

IPS refers to Individual Placement and Support. IPS is an evidence-based practice.



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Personalized benefits counseling is provided. Clients are offered assistance in obtaining accurate information about how their benefits will be affected by a return to work, as well as information about applicable work incentives. Information is provided by a person who has ongoing training in this area.

“Personalized benefits planning helps clients make informed choices about trying a job and working more than they thought they could. It also prevents people from quitting jobs if their checks are reduced or if they have concerns about losing their benefits.”

– Margaret Moeller, Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services

Contact with employers begins soon after the person expresses interest in working. When a person is referred to IPS, employment specialists spend a few weeks getting to know the person and working on a career profile. Then, the employment specialist and/or client begin visiting employers in person. IPS does not use vocational evaluations or situational assessments prior to looking for a job.

“The federal regulations state that counselors can use anecdotal information from clients and others to develop the employment plan. So, the career profile, which includes a work history, information about the person’s disability, employment preferences, etc., can be used for this purpose. Furthermore, it is possible to change the employment plan at any time as the counselor learns more about the person. In fact, if the person obtains a job, the job can be considered a learning experience (a type of assessment).”

– Kathleen Enders, Wisconsin Division of Vocational Rehabilitation

Employment specialists develop relationships with employers.

Employment specialists strive to make at least six in-person contacts with employers each week to learn more about their hiring preferences and business needs.

“Whether the economy is good or bad, employers appreciate knowing someone they trust to help them fill job openings. Most employers would rather have an applicant referred to them than place an ad in the classifieds. Furthermore, employment specialists who understand the needs of a particular business can sometimes help employers with solutions to their business problems.”

– Jeff Zola, Ohio Rehabilitation Services Commission

Job supports are ongoing. Employment specialists provide job supports for about a year, on average, or longer if the person continues to need and desire job supports. Over time, the mental health team may provide supports for people whose jobs are stable.

“The Vocational Rehabilitation Program benefits by partnering with IPS programs that can provide the ongoing, individualized, job supports needed for people to be successful in retaining and advancing in their jobs. Vocational Rehabilitation cannot provide these extended services alone.”

– Claire Courtney, Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development

Client preferences are honored. Employment specialists honor preferences for type of work, hours of work, job supports provided, disclosure of a disability, family involvement, and so forth.

“It’s important not to encourage people to take any open positions, but to help them think about the diverse range of jobs available that they might like, including those with higher wages. Vocational Rehabilitation counselors and employment specialists meet together with each client to talk about the person’s preferences, to suggest possibilities the client may not have thought about, and to develop an employment plan for finding and keeping employment.”

– Joe Miller, Oregon Vocational Rehabilitation



Strategies for VR Collaboration with IPS Supported Employment

Attend vocational unit meetings. The IPS supervisor and employment specialists meet weekly to share job leads and brainstorm solutions for people on their caseloads. Many IPS units welcome VR counselors to attend some of these meetings in order to better coordinate services and learn about each other's service delivery systems.

Participate in mental health treatment team meetings. Mental health treatment team meetings usually include case managers, counselors, and employment specialists. Other practitioners who attend might be psychiatrists, nurses, or housing personnel. In some cases, VR counselors occasionally attend these meetings as well. They report that the meetings help because they can hear more about the treatment being provided to their clients, and also because they can share information about employment and Vocational Rehabilitation. In addition, it provides an opportunity for VR counselors to hear about people who may be referred to them in the near future. It may be necessary to sign a confidentiality agreement before attending these meetings since many of the people discussed will not have an open case with VR.

Meet monthly with the IPS team. The focus of these meetings is to discuss people on both the IPS and VR caseload, rather than to talk about administrative issues. For example, the employment specialists and supervisor might meet at the VR office with any VR counselors who have open cases on the IPS team. It is helpful to invite supervisors who can follow up on issues discussed in the meeting.

Establish office hours at the mental health center. Some agencies are able to share office space with VR counselors for at least a few hours each week. The advantages for VR counselors are that they are able to share information with mental health practitioners easily, and they also report that clients are more likely to attend appointments at a familiar location.

Invite employment specialists to attend meetings with individual clients. When meeting with clients to discuss or update their employment plan, the VR counselor invites the employment specialist to participate.

Join an IPS steering committee. Help your local IPS program with implementation and program improvement by offering to join their steering committee. Typically, these committees meet two to four times each year to talk about fidelity to the model, to problem-solve issues, and to think about strategies to improve outcomes.

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For more information about IPS supported employment, go to:
<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~ips>.