

Connecting Veterans to Work: An Employment Toolkit for Housing and Behavioral Health Providers

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**HOMELESS &
HOUSING
RESOURCE
CENTER**

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Introduction

Employment is a critical element of a comprehensive approach to housing stability for many Veterans with serious mental illness (SMI) or substance use disorder (SUD). Employment provides income that can increase housing access. Evidence-based employment models are not only effective short-term interventions but also reduce dependence on mental health services over time.¹

For providers whose expertise is in either behavioral health or housing, helping a Veteran navigate the employment process and access appropriate resources may seem daunting. This toolkit provides these professionals with information about the importance of work and a practical approach to connecting the Veterans they serve with employment services. While this toolkit focuses on employment for Veterans with SMI, SUD, or co-occurring disorders, most of the information and strategies presented are universal and can be applied to nonVeterans as well. A short guide that can be shared directly with participants is included as an appendix.

SAMHSA's Dimensions of Recovery

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines recovery as a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live self-directed lives, and strive to reach their full potential.² SAMHSA describes four major dimensions of recovery³:



Health: overcoming or managing one's disease(s) or symptoms, (e.g., abstaining from alcohol, illicit drugs, and nonprescribed medications when a person has an addiction) and, for everyone in recovery, making informed, healthy choices that support physical and emotional well-being



Home: having a stable and safe place to live



Purpose: conducting meaningful daily activities, such as a job, school, volunteer work, family caregiving, or creative endeavors, and having the independence, income, and resources to participate in society



Community: having relationships and social networks that provide support, friendship, love, and hope

Employment can positively impact each of these dimensions as discussed later in this toolkit. First, it is important to establish the foundation for discussing work.

Defining Employment and Work

The traditional definition of employment is structured and specific: full-time (40 hours per week) work for one employer within a hierarchical relationship. A more modern definition of employment emphasizes flexibility, particularly regarding hours worked and the employer-employee relationship. This definition includes part-time, seasonal, or contract work; self-employment; gig work; or any combination of these for compensation. In contrast, work is “any activity performed by persons of any sex and age to produce goods or to provide services for use by others or for [their] own use.”⁴ This toolkit uses this broader definition of work, focusing on activities for use by others, whether paid, unpaid, or volunteer. It is important to remember that work is not a one-size-fits-all activity.

Work Is Not One-Size-Fits-All

Every person is different. Finding the right work “fit” requires considering many factors, including

- number of hours,
- type of work,
- location of work,
- compensation, and
- support or training.

It’s also important to remember to be adaptable.

The right “fit” today may not be the right fit in six months or a year.



Photo by [Brett Jordan](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Employment Models: Types of Work

Within this broader context of work, many different models or approaches engage individuals with SMI, SUD, and co-occurring disorders.

- **Competitive employment:** unsubsidized work integrated into the public workforce, where anyone can apply and employees earn market-rate compensation in competitive full-time or part-time employment
- **Supported employment:** intensive services to help individuals with significant disabilities or mental health conditions find and maintain competitive employment integrated into the community. Different models of supported employment exist, including the evidence-based Individual Placement and Support (IPS) Supported Employment model



- **Subsidized or transitional employment:** time-limited work placements in which a program, grant, or employer subsidizes some or all the wages to help individuals build basic or specialized job skills, experience, and work history, often as a bridge to competitive employment
- **Therapeutic work or work therapy:** a vocational rehabilitation program that uses work or work-related activities (e.g., training, life skills, education) to help people recover from physical or mental illness
- **Self-employment:** individuals who work for themselves rather than for an employer, including several types:
 - *Entrepreneurship:* establishing an independent business
 - *Contract or freelance work:* independent work in which an individual is hired to complete a specific project(s)
 - *Gig work:* independent task-based work (e.g., rideshare driving, delivery)
- **Volunteering:** work performed willingly without salary or compensation

The Importance of Work

Why do people work? At the most basic level, people work to make money to meet their basic needs, including food, housing, and medical care. While some Veterans with SMI and SUD receive benefits through VA Disability Compensation, Supplemental Security Income, or Social Security Disability Insurance, that income alone is often not enough to cover rent. Maximizing income from all sources, including employment, is necessary to close this gap, increase access to housing, and promote long-term stability. The financial rewards of work are important but only scratch the surface. The benefits of work are well documented and affect individuals and society in multiple ways.

These benefits connect directly to the Dimensions of Recovery discussed earlier, as indicated [by the icon/color]. As you read through these benefits, the importance of work in recovery becomes clear.

Benefits for Individuals



- Improved self-esteem
- May help establish or maintain eligibility for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid benefits



- Empowerment through choice that can lead to better overall health and well-being
- Societal importance of identifying as a “worker”



- Decreased isolation
- Increased connection and sense of belonging



Benefits Specific to Behavioral Health

- Decreased risk of suicide
- Decreased reliance on services over time
- Important component of recovery
- Increased sobriety

Benefits to Systems

- Reduces the stigma associated with mental illness and substance use
- Contributes to stronger communities
- Supports service integration across systems

Research has established a bidirectional relationship between employment status and mental health, and “that mental health problems were both a consequence of and risk factor for poor employment status.”⁵ Individuals with SMI report that work helped their recovery through increased self-esteem, financial benefits, and coping strategies for their psychiatric symptoms.⁶ Importantly, people do not have to work full-time to benefit from employment. In one study, researchers found that men obtained the benefits of work in just 8 hours per week, while women needed 20 hours per week.⁷

Veterans and Work

When it comes to work, Veterans face specific challenges and have unique strengths. Military culture is structured, hierarchical, and mission-driven. Veterans often find a sense of purpose and camaraderie during their service. For many, the transition to civilian life means losing their purpose and identity, leaving them feeling empty and isolated. Difficulty reconnecting with family and friends, along with SMI and SUD, can amplify those feelings and may lead to homelessness. For these Veterans, employment can fill the void by providing purpose, fostering a sense of belonging, and reducing isolation.

Veterans face additional barriers to entering the civilian workforce. In one study, researchers described this challenge as the three “Ss” of transition: stereotypes, skills, and support.⁸ Veterans must navigate stereotypes held by employers and colleagues while confronting their own biases toward civilians. Many Veterans performed highly specialized duties during their service. Translating those skills to the civilian workforce can be challenging. As a result, many Veterans find themselves underemployed in lower-skilled jobs, feeling unappreciated and resentful. Support during and after the transition from military service can mitigate the effects of these changes.

Workplace environment is extremely important as well. Veterans who are accustomed to a strict chain of command and direct communication may struggle to adjust to a flatter organizational structure that rewards individualism and interpersonal relationships. Veterans who have experienced military sexual trauma may need additional support that affects when, where, and how they work. Addressing these factors is important but does not mean that Veterans with SMI and SUD cannot or should not pursue employment. In fact, employment can be the catalyst that breaks this cycle and supports successful integration into civilian life. It means an individualized approach is essential to success.



Talking About Work

According to the IPS Employment Center, “Two-thirds of people with serious mental illness want to work, but only 15% are employed.”⁹ There are many reasons for this discrepancy, including limited access to evidence-based programs and misinformation about whether work is “appropriate” for people with SMI and SUD. To address this reality, service providers need to talk about work as early and as often as possible during their interactions with Veterans.

The transition from unemployment to employment is a significant change that brings a variety of emotions, including anxiety, fear, and hope. Addressing these issues requires an intentional commitment to creating structures within programs and organizations that support work. One effective strategy is to hold ongoing, purposeful conversations about the possibilities of work and participants’ experiences in the working world. Building rapport and trust through motivational interviewing and trauma-informed care is also important. For additional engagement strategies, see the Homelessness and Housing Resource Center (HHRC) brief [*The Benefits of Employment to Recovery and Economic Self-Sufficiency*](#). The HHRC also has additional resources on motivational interviewing and trauma-informed care.

Establishing Facts

Misconceptions about whether Veterans with SMI or SUD can work—and about what happens to their benefits if they do—keep many Veterans from pursuing employment. Rather than repeat those myths, this section establishes the facts and explains why each one matters in supporting Veterans.

Fact	Why It Matters
Many Veterans with SMI and SUD want to work and do so successfully.	Assuming fragility leads providers to steer Veterans away from work. Beginning with Veterans’ capabilities opens doors and allows Veterans to pursue the opportunities they want.
Many people who have a mental illness or use substances work successfully. Employment has been shown to help with recovery.	Waiting until symptoms fully resolve delays an intervention that supports recovery. Work and treatment can happen at the same time.
SSA offers work incentives that encourage returning to work while retaining cash benefits and/or health insurance. Veterans with a disability rating can work in most cases.	Fear of losing benefits prevents many Veterans from pursuing employment. Understanding these protections and connecting Veterans to benefits counseling allows them to earn income without risking their safety net.
People with SMI or SUD may worry about work and its implications and may never believe they are ready. Making employment part of ongoing conversations allows them to process those concerns.	If providers wait for the “right” moment, the conversation may never happen. Raising the topic of work early and often gives Veterans time to process their concerns at their own pace.

It is important for providers to examine their beliefs and ideas around work, especially regarding people with SMI, SUD, and/or those who are homeless. Assumptions about “readiness” and “appropriateness” can cause clinicians to steer Veterans toward benefits and away from work. While the intention may be to protect Veterans from failure, the result is often preventing them from the opportunities and benefits work can provide and instilling a belief that they are incapable. Given the benefits of work discussed earlier, all efforts should be made to screen Veterans into rather than out of employment services.

Choosing the Right Employment Model

When considering which of the employment models discussed earlier is most appropriate, providers should focus on what the participant wants. Competitive, subsidized, and therapeutic models may all include job coaching, skills assessments, and other employment services. While the strategies may be similar, the goals of these programs are not, so the how and why of service provision are different. For example, in a therapeutic model, a skills assessment might reveal gaps in concentration that are then practiced through work tasks. A subsidized model might identify short-term work placements that build basic or specific job skills. A competitive model would match the skills demonstrated in the assessment to an existing job opening. Deciding which approach to use depends on where the Veteran is in their employment experience and where they want to go.

For Veterans interested in competitive employment, IPS supported employment is an evidence-based model that helps people with serious mental illness quickly find and maintain competitive jobs that align with their interests. More information about IPS can be found at [The IPS Employment Center](#).

Connecting to Employment Resources

Behavioral health and housing service providers should understand the important role work plays in their clients’ stability. However, they are not expected to be experts in employment services. Instead, providers should identify local partners and programs that offer these services. Suggested resources are listed below, organized by target population. It is important to remember that Veterans are eligible for mainstream services. Providers should explore all options before referring to the most appropriate partner, which may not be a Veteran-specific one.

Veteran-Specific Employment Services

US DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

*Programs are listed from most to least specialized

- [Homeless Veterans’ Reintegration Program \(HVRP\)](#): A competitive grant program administered by the Veterans’ Employment and Training Service (VETS), HVRP helps homeless or at-risk Veterans reintegrate into competitive employment. To determine whether an [HVRP grant](#) is available in your community, visit HVRP Grants.
- [Jobs for Veterans State Grants](#): a formula grant administered by VETS for states to hire dedicated staff to provide individualized employment services for eligible Veterans.



US DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

- [Homeless Veteran Community Employment Service](#): This program focuses on employment outcomes for Veterans participating in Veterans Health Administration homeless programs by placing Community Employment Coordinators at VA Medical Centers.
- [Compensated Work Therapy \(CWT\)](#): An employment and therapeutic work program offered at all VA medical centers, CWT includes several treatment models, such as transitional work, IPS supported employment, and vocational assistance, although model availability varies by location.
- [Veteran Readiness and Employment \(VR&E\)](#): VR&E is a vocational rehabilitation benefit for eligible Veterans and service members with a service-connected disability that impacts their ability to work. VR&E services are provided through five tracks: reemployment, rapid access to employment, self-employment, employment through long-term services, and independent living.

MAINSTREAM EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

- [American Job Centers \(AJCs\)](#): a network of more than 2,200 centers that provides free assistance to job seekers through a variety of career and employment services. Note that eligible Veterans receive priority of service at the AJCs.
- [SNAP Employment & Training](#): Through this program, funded by the Department of Agriculture, eligible participants can gain skills, access training, and find work to achieve long-term stability.
- [Work Incentives Planning and Assistance \(WIPA\)](#): Part of the Ticket to Work Program, WIPA provides individualized information on the effect of work on benefits and health insurance, and the availability of work supports.

Next Steps

This toolkit provides a foundation for understanding the importance and benefits of work for Veterans with SMI, SUD, or who are homeless. Housing and behavioral health providers can build on this foundation to support their clients and connect them with additional resources. Sharing the benefits of work is a great place to start. To support this process, the toolkit includes a stand-alone guide for Veterans in the appendix. The guide takes Veterans through the process of thinking about work and how it can benefit their lives. It also addresses common concerns about working and provides resources for further exploration. Share the appendix directly with your participants, encourage them to explore the work, and follow up with them to offer support. Helping Veterans with SMI and SUD find the work that best suits them can support recovery and improve long-term housing stability.



THINKING ABOUT WORK: A GUIDE FOR VETERANS

Using This Guide

This guide is for anyone with a serious mental illness (SMI), substance use disorder (SUD), or who is homeless or at risk of homelessness and is thinking about employment or work. That's it. There are no other requirements and no other restrictions. While some resources are specifically for Veterans, many are open to everyone. Before you get started, keep the following in mind:

1. *Read the entire guide.*
2. *Be open to the possibility of work.*
3. *If you decide you are not ready today, commit to revisiting this guide at a specific time in the future (e.g., in thirty days).*

Thinking About Work

Take a few minutes to think about your life right now. Included below are several questions to get you started and to focus your thoughts. Remember, this is about what you think and how you feel; there are no wrong answers.

- What parts of your life are going well?
- What makes you happy?
- Are there parts of your life that could be better or things that are missing?
- Do you have everything you need, such as food, clothing, and shelter?
- Are there things you want to do or have that you can't afford?
- Do you have a person or a network of people who support you?
- Are you part of a community?
- Do you feel good about yourself?

Benefits of Work

Now let's talk about the benefits of working. Regardless of how you answered the questions above, research shows that work can improve quality of life. Some of the benefits of work include the following:

- **Income:** more money to buy what you need and want
- **Self-esteem:** feeling better about yourself and your contribution to society
- **Recovery:** ability to follow recovery plan and achieve or maintain sobriety
- **Mental health:** improvement in psychiatric symptoms and decreased risk of suicide
- **Community:** less isolation, feeling connected, and having a place to belong



Think back to your answers to the questions above and identify the connections between work and making your life better. Despite these benefits, many people with SMI or SUD are unsure about work. The two most common reasons for this uncertainty are (1) the belief that you cannot or should not work; and (2) the concern that if you work, you will lose your benefits. Let's look at each of these reasons more closely.

You Can Do It: Making Work “Work” for You

Despite what you may have heard from others, Veterans with SMI and SUD work successfully. The key is finding the right kind of work for your unique circumstances. There are many different aspects of work to consider, including

- the number of hours (full-time or part-time),
- who you work for (an employer or yourself),
- how much support you get (training or case management), and
- whether you get paid (compensated or volunteer work).

Some Veterans with SMI and SUD, because of their conditions, past experiences, or the opinions of others, worry that they may not succeed. This fear is understandable, but many programs can support you. Don't limit yourself based on stereotypes.

Is Gig Work a Good Fit?

Benefits of gig work for Veterans with SMI or SUD include the following:

- Task-based—you need only the required skill (e.g., fixing things, driving).
- Independent—you work for yourself.
- Flexible—you decide when, where, and how much to work.

*And one caution: Gig work is flexible, but it often means no benefits and less steady income.

Work and Benefits

Many people believe that receiving cash benefits from the SSA or the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Disability Income program, they cannot work without losing those benefits. In many cases, that is simply not true. SSA has several work incentives that encourage people to explore work while keeping their cash benefits and health insurance. For example, the trial work period allows people to work for nine months and still get their full disability payment, regardless of how much they earn. In some cases, although income from work decreases the disability payment, the individual's total income (work plus benefits) increases.

If you receive VA disability compensation, working usually does not change your monthly payment or your disability rating. The primary exception is a benefit called Total Disability based on Individual Unemployability, which has limits on how much you can earn from work. A benefits counselor can help determine whether this limitation applies to you.



BENEFITS COUNSELING

A benefits counselor can review your specific situation, explain how working may affect your federal and state benefits, and help you determine the best combination of work and benefits for your needs. Many employment programs include benefits counseling as part of their services. You can find disability benefits counseling services near you on [SSA's Ticket to Work](#) website or by calling 866-968-7842.

What Do You Want to Do?

The next step in this process is figuring out what you want to do. Instead of focusing on a specific job, think about what you like and what you are good at. Exploring your interests and is a great place to start. The O*NET interest profiler will ask you to rate how much you would like to do various work activities. Based on your answers, O*NET will identify your areas of interest that you can use to explore different jobs or careers. Another great resource is [My Next Move for Veterans](#). This site not only allows you to search for careers by keywords or industry, but it also includes a skills translator that suggests civilian careers based on your military classification.

To this point, we have focused on the tangible aspects of work, including schedules, pay, and skill requirements. However, there are some other factors to consider, including workplace policies, management style, and environment. Only you can decide what is important to you.

What Does Success Look Like?

Every Veteran with SMI or SUD brings a unique set of strengths, interests, and challenges, so “success” will look different for everyone. Think about success in terms of your goals. That could mean getting a full-time job in a field you are experienced in, participating in a ninety-day work trial program, volunteering for a cause you are passionate about, or getting skills training for a new interest. Remember, finding the right work fit requires that you take it one step at a time. Trying different things is part of the process, so don't get discouraged. ***Stay positive and seek support when you need it.***

Next Steps

- Talk with the person who gave you this guide about the resources that best fit your needs.
- Explore the resources listed below.

Additional Resources

Listed below are several resources that provide employment services. Keep in mind that many have specific eligibility or other requirements (e.g., only competitive employment).

FOR VETERANS

Crisis Resources

- [Veterans Crisis Line](#): If you are going through a difficult time or having thoughts of suicide, free and confidential support is available 24/7. You do not need to be enrolled in VA benefits or health care to use this service. Dial 988, then press 1, text 838255, or chat online at [VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat](#).



- National Call Center for Homeless Veterans: Free, confidential help for Veterans who are homeless or at risk of losing their housing. You can talk to a trained VA counselor any time, day or night, or chat online. Call 1-877-424-3838 and press 1, available 24/7.

Employment Resources

- Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP): HVRP helps Veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to reintegrate into competitive employment. To determine whether there is a program near you, visit the active grants website.
- Compensated Work Therapy (CWT): An employment and therapeutic work program offered at all VA medical centers, CWT includes several treatment models, such as transitional work, IPS supported employment, and vocational assistance, although model availability varies by location.
- Veterans Readiness and Employment (VR&E): VR&E provides vocational rehabilitation services for eligible Veterans and service members with a service-connected disability. VR&E services include independent living, long-term services, and rapid access to employment. Find the nearest VA medical center here: <https://www.va.gov/find-locations>.

For Everyone

- SSA Ticket to Work Program: a program that connects people receiving Social Security disability benefits to services and support to enter and remain in the workforce.
- American Job Centers (AJCs): a network of more than 2,200 centers that provides free assistance to job seekers through a variety of career and employment services. Find the closest AJC here.
- Job Accommodation Network: provides free expert advice, training, and resources on workplace accommodations for people with disabilities.



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