

Needs Assessment for a Comprehensive Reemployment Program Among Residents of a Work Rehabilitation Program for Individuals With Unstable or Lack of Housing

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Objective: Individuals in transitional housing programs often have a goal of reaching stable employment, but the unique needs and barriers for achieving this warrants further study. **Methods:** A structured interview guide was administered orally and descriptive data analysis was done for this exploratory mixed-methods study. **Results:** Commonly reported reemployment challenges included legal barriers and unmet transportation, housing, and financial needs. More than two-thirds of residents reported no place to live after the program regardless of if they had previous precarious housing. Emerging themes included challenges regarding sufficient time for the transition to being employed, fear of relapse, and lack of long-term goals and planning. **Conclusions:** Findings suggest that residential rehabilitation programs are an important resource. While these programs tend to focus on reemployment, their services could be enhanced by assessing individual needs and allowing for variation in reemployment preparation.

Keywords: homelessness, needs assessment, reemployment

Adverse effects on individual well-being as a result of unemployment and underemployment are well-documented.^{1,2} While employed individuals reap a multitude of benefits, including

earned income to purchase necessities and the ability to participate in societal structures, both physical and psychological health may be diminished when an individual loses or is unable to attain or sustain adequate employment.^{1,3} This also involves a feedback loop where physical and psychological health problems precipitate unstable employment.^{4–6} Unemployment and underemployment, in turn, are barriers to securing stable housing.⁷

Shifts towards part-time, contingent work over the past several decades have led to increased job insecurity across the labor market.² These changes increase the vulnerability of specific job-seeking individuals, especially those who have been previously incarcerated and those who have unstable housing or a lack of housing. The same characteristics that serve as barriers to obtaining and maintaining employment, such as having been formerly incarcerated, or having experienced substance abuse, mental illness, and physical disability, also contribute to unstable or lack of housing.⁸

Individuals who experience these phenomena often have large gaps in their employment histories and other challenges that further exacerbate their perceptions of employment prospects prior to finding work and job security once employed.^{9,10} Other considerations that make securing employment difficult for those with unstable or a lack of housing include inconsistent access to a mailing address, phone, and internet. Additionally, there is some evidence that employers discriminate against individuals who are members of highly incarcerated racial groups, regardless of their criminal records.¹¹

Policy and legal protections for these groups related to employment and housing are lacking. In fact, individuals experiencing homelessness have no explicit protections at a federal level, but some states, like Illinois, have laws stating individuals experiencing homelessness cannot be discriminated against for employment because they lack a fixed address.¹² On the other hand, individuals currently using drugs have limited employment protections and are specifically omitted in the amendments to the Civil Rights Act that relate to employment discrimination. However, there may be protections for those in treatment for past drug and/or alcohol addiction under the Americans with Disabilities Act, Rehabilitation Act, and Federal Medical Leave Act.^{13,14} There are no legal protections for ex-offenders related to housing and employment discrimination despite ex-offenders often having conditions of probation that include the probation officer's approval of housing and the requirement to maintain formal employment.^{15,16}

Many agencies and organizations provide services to these populations to aid with reemployment. Despite there being many programs designed to rehabilitate and facilitate integration into society and into the workforce, there are relatively few studies that evaluate their effectiveness and most use participant self-reports and official records to measure rates of recidivism, usually within 1 year of program completion.¹⁷ There is evidence that programs that provide vocational skills training help workers to reenter the workforce following a long-term absence and employers are

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Clinical Significance: Work is a significant determinant of health. Re-employment is a major, accepted strategy to improve the health and well-being of individuals who have experienced incarceration and are recovering from substance use.

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more likely to hire formerly incarcerated individuals who have participated in programs accessed through recognized intermediary agencies.^{11,18} However, many reemployment programs focus primarily on job-specific skill training without addressing basic needs, such as transportation and housing, that may impact an individual's ability to obtain and maintain employment in the long term.¹⁹ Despite these concerns, these reemployment services serve as important sources of support for vulnerable populations who are attempting to reenter the labor force. Newer reemployment programs employing supportive employment and individual placement and support models have shown positive results in subgroups of the population, such as the severely mentally ill and disabled, that would likely be replicated in the general population.²⁰ Questions remain related to feasibility and cost-effectiveness of delivery of these reemployment programs to more general populations.

While there is a conceptual framework in public health that posits that addressing structural resources and assessing needs may positively impact outcomes,²¹ there is little evidence that suggests that reemployment programs systematically assess needs and perceptions of individual participants before or upon entry into these programs.^{17,22} Additionally, while these programs often serve vulnerable populations, the services provided may be the same regardless of unique individual needs and life circumstances. Therefore, it is important to assess if and how the needs of individuals within these programs differ. The aims of this study are to (1) assess needs and barriers for reemployment among individuals of a residential rehabilitation program and (2) compare these needs and barriers between those with and without a self-reported history of unstable housing.

METHODS

Study Population

In this mixed methods study, we recruited residents in a religious-based residential rehabilitation program in Chicago. This program has many locations nationwide. Despite the program being rooted in Christian beliefs, those not of those beliefs were allowed to participate if they completed the required activities of all participants. At this site, up to 174 individuals reside and participate in work rehabilitation. The program lasts up to 1 year and residents attend counseling and substance abuse recovery programs using the Alcoholics Anonymous model, meet with social workers, work in various occupations within the program, and prepare for employment after completing the program. Common jobs assigned to participants include reception, call centers, loading and unloading delivery trucks, retail, janitorial, and maintenance. Participants receive a small stipend, lodging, and meals for their work.

Participants come to the program via different pathways, including the criminal justice system, referral from other social services and charities, and self-referral. While not a requirement, many of these residents have experienced precarious housing, incarceration, unemployment, and other life stressors before joining the program. Participants advance through a "levels" curriculum. There is a high turnover of residents as approximately 50% are new to the facility at any given time (level one). While there is no official data on reasons for this turnover, it is not from job placement through the program. Levels one through five take approximately 1 month each. Once the participant reaches level six, they remain at this level until they leave the program as they seek alternate housing and employment. While the program generally follows a traditional two-step approach to reemployment by focusing on issues such as substance abuse first, residents begin working within the program upon entry, and begin reemployment-training after 1 month.

Eligible study participants were adults who had reached level two status and were fluent in English. It is uncertain exactly how many in the program are not fluent in English, but is estimated to be

very few based on the requirements of the program. Level two status is an internal criterion that reflects having been in the program long enough to be in the initial stages of preparing for reemployment. Convenience sampling was used.

The IRB-approved (University of Illinois at Chicago protocol #2016–0278) consent document and initial parts of the recruitment process and interviews clearly articulated that qualification for services from their program was not contingent on their participation in this study. With input from the program director, it was determined that compensation would not be offered to participants as it may pose an undue influence due to their limited income and minimal expenses as they are residents in the program with full room and board provided at no cost.

Interview Instrument

An initial questionnaire was developed with assistance from the UIC Survey Research Laboratory based on the known needs of those with unstable or a lack of housing, as well as the general population, when seeking future employment. During the initial development stage, 12 cognitive interviews²³ were conducted with the target study population to assess respondent comprehension of survey questions and make revisions as needed. The initial instrument consisted of predominantly closed-ended questions with added structured and open-ended probes for constructs that may not have been readily understood by the respondent and for questions where appropriate response dimensions were unknown. Additional unstructured probes were used when the respondent seemed uncertain or when responses were inconsistent.

Through information voluntarily offered by the respondent during the cognitive interviews and the value of the information retrieved, open-ended questions were included in the final structured interview guide. Any additional information offered by the respondent to contextualize answers was also recorded. The final instrument also queried information regarding job histories, financial and social assets, and the respondents' motivation and expectations for their return to the workforce, which was determined to be of relevance and importance in the initial development stages (Supplemental Digital Content 1, <http://links.lww.com/JOEM/A674>).

Appropriate changes were made to the questionnaire and 39 residents were subsequently interviewed using the structured interview guide between August 2016 and July 2017 until response saturation was reached. All interviews were conducted in-person at the residential facility by one interviewer with a request to audio record. The interviewer had no affiliation with the rehabilitation program.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Excel by a research assistant. Responses were read and re-read by the interviewer. Data were analyzed descriptively for this exploratory study comparing those who reported previous unstable housing to those who did not. The closed-ended responses using the final interview guide were analyzed using SAS 9.4 (SAS Institute, Cary, NC), while the open-ended responses from all interviews were assessed in Microsoft Excel (Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA) using content analysis. Content analysis allows for descriptive analysis of qualitative data similar to thematic analysis, while also taking into account a quantification of the qualitative data.²⁴ This analysis primarily complemented the quantitative data and identified new concepts.

Coding was completed by the interviewer and another author listened to a subset of interviews to verify coding (five [12.8%] interviews) in addition to reviewing the transcribed data file. As the interviews were structured, most responses fell within the code assigned each question; however, responses where new information emerged that highlighted information or topics were assigned new

TABLE 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Categorical Variables	History of Precarious Housing			
	Yes (<i>n</i> = 23)		No (<i>n</i> = 16)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Male	16	69.6%	12	75.0%
Level status				
Level 2	8	34.8%	1	6.3%
Level 3	8	34.8%	2	12.5%
Level 4	2	8.7%	5	31.3%
Level 5	1	4.3%	1	6.3%
Level 6	3	13.0%	5	31.3%
Employed	1	4.3%	2	12.5%
Race and ethnicity				
Non-Hispanic Black/African American	12	52.2%	5	31.3%
Non-Hispanic White	7	30.4%	7	43.8%
Non-Hispanic Native American/Alaskan Native	1	4.3%	1	6.3%
Hispanic	2	8.7%	0	0.0%
Other/Choose not to answer	1	4.3%	3	18.8%
Marital status				
Never been married	15	65.2%	12	75.0%
Married	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Divorced/Widowed	8	34.8%	4	25.0%
Member of US Armed Forces	2	8.7%	2	12.5%
Highest Level of Education				
Less than HS	5	21.7%	3	18.8%
HS Grad/GED	3	13.0%	8	50.0%
Some college/Vocational training	13	56.5%	4	25.0%
College degree	2	8.7%	1	6.3%
Continuous Variables	Mean (sd)	Range	Mean (sd)	Range
Age	45.8 (11.4)	24–61	43.9 (9.8)	26–62
Number of dependents	0.4 (0.8)	0–2	0.1 (0.3)	0–1
Number of close relatives	4.9 (5.7)	1–25	5.6 (8.4)	0–30
Number of close friends	2.0 (1.8)	0–6	4.3 (4.8)	0–20

codes to represent this added information. Discrepancies between reviewers were discussed until both reviewers agreed on the final interpretation. Responses were left in the participants' words rather than recoded to reflect external definitions of variables, such as housing status.

RESULTS

Interviews lasted 42 minutes on average (range of 23–70 minutes) and all were audio recorded. Respondent demographic information is reported in Table 1. Of note, over 50% of the respondents reported educational attainment beyond a high school diploma and had, on average, more than five close friends and family members. Residents with reported histories of precarious housing were disproportionately involved at earlier levels in the program, identified racially as black, and had some college or vocational training. Those that reported histories of unstable housing were also more likely to acknowledge religious or spiritual beliefs as being extremely or very important in their life (78.3% vs 56.3%). All participants reported being born in the United States.

More than two-thirds of residents reported not having a place to live once leaving the program regardless of whether they had a history of precarious housing prior to entering the program: 73.9% of those with any reported previous unstable housing and 68.7% of those without a history of unstable housing. This is likely an underestimate as some reported having a place to live after the program, but these housing arrangements included transitional housing or precarious arrangements with family that fit the criteria

for precarious housing as defined by United States law.²⁵ The following section is primarily driven by the quantitative findings contextualized by the content analysis.

Attitudes Towards Future Employment and Reflections on Past Employment

All participants stated having a job was extremely or very important for their future. Finding a job was a priority to most participants and over 90% were confident they would get a job in the next year; however, level of preparedness and steps taken in their current job search varied (Table 2). Participants reporting previous unstable housing indicated that they would document approximately six jobs on average on their resumes compared with an average of five jobs among those with previous stable housing. On average, it had been 3 months since residents had last been employed; 4.3 months for those with previous unstable housing and 1.8 months for those with previous stable housing. There was congruence between what was reported as the jobs they would document on their resumes, the jobs they felt best prepared to get now, and the best job they would like to get someday. If the type of future employment differed from past work, the jobs discussed during the interview often related to their current circumstances with many expressing interest in jobs that involved helping others that were also experiencing similar hardships such as addiction. Future aspirations of owning their own business were often reported as the best job they would like to get. A 55-year-old man said, “Basically, just own my own business in what I’m doing now and

TABLE 2. Perceived Job Preparedness

	History of Precarious Housing			
	Yes (n = 23)		No (n = 16)	
	n	%	n	%
How Prepared do You Feel to Get A Job?				
Extremely/Very	13	56.5%	9	56.3%
Somewhat	7	30.4%	6	37.5%
Not very/Not at all	3	13.0%	1	6.3%
Right now, how much of a priority is finding a new job?				
Extreme/Important	20	87.0%	12	75.0%
Somewhat	2	8.7%	2	12.5%
Not important/Not at all	1	4.3%	2	12.5%
How confident are you that you have enough _____ for the job you want?				
Math skills				
Extremely/Very	17	73.9%	11	68.8%
Somewhat	5	21.7%	5	31.3%
Not very/Not at all	1	4.3%	0	0.0%
Reading skills				
Extremely/Very	21	91.3%	14	87.5%
Somewhat	1	4.3%	2	12.5%
Not very/Not at all	1	4.3%	0	0.0%
Computer skills				
Extremely/Very	12	52.2%	8	50.0%
Somewhat	2	8.7%	7	43.8%
Not very/Not at all	9	39.1%	1	6.3%
People skills				
Extremely/Very	23	100.0%	14	87.5%
Somewhat	0	0.0%	2	12.5%
Not very/Not at all	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Writing skills				
Extremely/Very	17	73.9%	10	62.5%
Somewhat	5	21.7%	5	31.3%
Not very/Not at all	1	4.3%	1	6.3%
Steps taken in current job search				
Thought about employment	22	95.7%	15	93.8%
Attended job training program	6	26.1%	3	18.8%
Prepared resume	16	69.6%	12	75.0%
Attended job fairs	4	17.4%	2	12.5%
Applied for jobs	9	39.1%	7	43.8%
Attended interviews	8	34.8%	3	18.8%
Other	11	47.8%	4	25.0%

continue to rebuild some of these neighborhoods that have just been torn completely down.”

The group of participants with previous episodes of unstable housing was more likely to report instances of discrimination related to finding or keeping a job (52.5% vs 25.0%) and not having a desire to seek employment (21.7% vs 16.7%). Those with previous stable housing were far more likely to report feeling overqualified for jobs they applied for (43.8% vs 18.8% underqualified), while those with previous episodes of unstable housing reported overqualification and underqualification with the same frequency (30.4%). Less than half reported their overqualifications to be a barrier in getting a job. In regard to personal assessments of preparedness for future employment, participants with previous episodes of unstable housing disproportionately reported feeling “not confident” with their computer skills compared with those with previous stable housing (Table 2).

Previous Experience with Job Training Programs

Those with previous episodes of unstable housing were more likely to report having attended previous employment training programs (69.6% vs 50.0%). Helpful trainings were often reported to contain specific job skills, reemployment skills (resume writing and interviewing), and life skills (financial management) training.

They often reported these programs worked to build their confidence and self-esteem. Trainings that were not helpful were described as using outdated material, not having good employment placement rates, and not keeping in line with what was advertised. Additionally, there was a sense that employment training programs may not adequately consider the needs of the groups they are serving by appropriately tailoring the curriculum and resources offered. A 30-year-old woman said:

“Some trainings it’s just about the numbers and not about, or filling seats, and not necessarily about the people making or living a sustainable lifestyle or income. You know most of those types of programs are funded or tax deductible or whatever the case might be and it’s just about putting something together really quick just to say you did it and not really meeting need. Like, when you go to an employment training you want to go and feel prepared to get a job.”

Barriers to Reemployment

Those with prior episodes of unstable housing also disproportionately reported psychological health issues and previous substance abuse as key barriers to finding and maintaining employment (Table 3). Legal barriers, including issues that are reported on

TABLE 3. Barriers to Reemployment

To What Degree Does a _____ Your Ability to be Hired or Keep a Job?	History of Precarious Housing															
	Yes (n = 23)								No (n = 16)							
	Great Degree		Moderate Degree		Small Degree		Not at All		Great Degree		Moderate Degree		Small Degree		Not at All	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Physical health condition or illness that you have been treated for currently affect	0	0.0%	3	13.0%	4	17.4%	16	69.6%	0	0.0%	1	6.3%	3	18.8%	12	75.0%
Psychological or nervous condition that you have been treated for currently affect	1	4.3%	1	4.3%	3	13.0%	18	78.3%	0	0.0%	1	6.3%	1	6.3%	14	87.5%
Past or present legal problems currently affect	4	17.4%	4	17.4%	5	21.7%	10	43.5%	4	25.0%	4	25.0%	2	12.5%	6	37.5%
Past substance abuse problems previously affected	9	39.1%	6	26.1%	3	13.0%	5	21.7%	1	6.3%	4	25.0%	3	18.8%	8	50.0%
Past or present substance abuse problems currently affect	2	8.7%	0	0.0%	3	13.0%	18	78.3%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	3	18.8%	13	81.3%
Responsibilities to care for a child or other family member currently affect	0	0.0%	1	4.3%	0	0.0%	22	95.7%	0	0.0%	1	6.3%	0	0.0%	15	93.8%

background checks such as debt, jail, court, or interactions with police, affected over half of the participants interviewed in both groups (Table 3). A 45-year-old man said:

“Legal issues can basically... basically that to me when that part comes up then you’re put into a separate category. Even though you might have served your time, you’re still under that stigma of ‘you did this’. Instead of ‘you paid your time it’s over’, it lingers to follow you because now it puts you in this category of now you bad or someone who makes bad decisions and it’s not fair. I just don’t. If you done something wrong, you paid your consequence, it’s over and done. But in today’s society it follows you and it puts you in this category of outcast or reject and I’ve experienced it. Even though it’s supposed to be equal opportunity employers but still once that information is gotten, they’re like ehheh they can make a decision not to hire. Well they can’t say oh we don’t want to hire you because of your background check, they’ll just say oh well you just don’t fit what we’re doing and they’ll cover up and really it’s to the fact that oh he has a background we don’t know if we want someone like that in our establishment.”

The majority of participants were more likely to attribute their unemployment to reasons that were within their personal control rather than structural determinants or macroeconomic factors such as the recession (68.6% overall). For example, a 57-year-old man exemplified this when he said:

“Because you do what you got to do. You control your own destiny, if you want to work you have to put in the effort too, it’s not gonna come to you, things are not gonna knock on your door, life’s not like that. You have to go get what you want.”

Employment Program Needs

Aside from having the ability to attend job fairs and guidance for workplace interactions and expectations, those with previous episodes of unstable housing were more likely to report transportation, housing, and financial needs as important in supporting their transition to employment (Table 4). Despite these needs being overwhelmingly reported as being of personal importance, less than half felt each of these needs were addressed in the program.

The largest disparity between self-reported need and availability for support within the program was funding for housing to assist in their transition to stable employment. One 52-year-old man, described the challenges of getting a place to live once becoming employed:

“I got 30 days to find an apartment. If I start a job after 30 days, nine out of ten I’m not gonna get paid for two weeks so that means, okay, we’ll say cause if I got in and the pay period is, I’m gonna go in a new pay period, I’m not gonna get my first check for three weeks almost, that’s one check. Now how am I gonna move into a new apartment when let’s say my one check is, I’ll just give you a small, say I take home \$700, after taxes I’m taking home \$700 now I gotta get back to work two weeks, I only got one other week left to find somewhere to stay. Now there’s no places that’s immediately gonna let me in cause they got me on some waiting list or something so you know where’s the help at? That’s what I mean they put you in positions that are unsuccessful. . . . Now if you had somewhere that you have \$500 and you need \$1500 well okay he did save up \$500 which is showing on my part that hey I have this and you know you already know I only got one check, I got to get back and forth, I got to eat and if a place were to give you assistance then that would be great. It would also be great if they had some places where they could help you get into it.”

A large proportion of respondents regardless of history of precarious housing reported that the program needs additional employment services and assistance to meet basic needs. Enhanced employment services that were discussed by the participants included additional education or vocational training, renewal of licenses needed for specific employment such as forklift operator’s license, training on interviewing and other skills, access to job-appropriate attire or money to purchase such clothing, and additional time to transition to fully independent living. Additional basic needs discussed by the residents included continued program support after transitioning to community living (aftercare programs), access to medical and mental health services, access to a cell phone, budget training, and assistance with obtaining a driver’s license.

The following section contains emerging themes identified solely through content analysis.

TABLE 4. Employment Program Needs

	History of Precarious Housing			
	Yes (n = 23)		No (n = 16)	
	n	%	n	%
Needs of Personal Importance				
Transportation	22	95.7%	14	87.5%
Funding for transportation	21	91.3%	13	81.3%
Housing	22	95.7%	14	87.5%
Funding for housing	22	95.7%	13	81.3%
Ability to attend job fairs	18	78.3%	15	93.8%
Knowledge of hiring companies	22	95.7%	14	87.5%
Guidance for workplace interactions and expectations	18	78.3%	13	81.3%
Financial management	15	65.2%	9	56.3%
Program needs				
Transportation	13	56.5%	9	56.3%
Funding for transportation	21	91.3%	11	68.8%
Housing	19	82.6%	9	56.3%
Funding for housing	23	100.0%	16	100.0%
Ability to attend job fairs	18	78.3%	8	50.0%
Knowledge of hiring companies	18	78.3%	14	87.5%
Guidance for workplace interactions and expectations	17	73.9%	8	50.0%
Financial management	21	91.3%	14	87.5%

Time

Lack of time was mentioned as an important barrier to reemployment. The participants reported a need for sufficient time to partake in the job search, the timing of when the program began to offer assistance with different aspects of a job search, such as the introduction of computer privileges, and the time needed to complete each of these steps. A 50-year-old man discussed this in the context of the amount of time he could dedicate to the job search despite having been in the program for 6 months, saying:

“It’s like here, you don’t get a phone till . . . like 6 months into the program and then it’s like you get one job search day per week so you only look for jobs 4 times a month . . . but you’ve been here 6 months already so you haven’t been interacting with anybody, haven’t got any job leads so now all of a sudden it’s like you need to find a job. . . . Oh yeah, you can call in the daytime or something like that but the only thing is that I can call you, but when you call me back I’m not able to talk to you because say I’m in work therapy so you leave a message so then I call you back and then you return the call and then you leave another message so it’s like not communicating period.”

Communication

Communication manifested in two important ways. First, it was unclear to many of the respondents what services were provided in the program and when participants could access reemployment services during the program (ie, timing). A 56-year-old man was unsure what was offered in the program saying “Well I’m not sure if they do that yet, maybe when I get into another level they might do all those things I said needed to but I’m not sure.” Additionally, limited access to phone and internet service was identified as a critical barrier to reemployment, such as described above regarding the ability to call and communicate with potential employers.

Fear of Relapse

While participants were eager to become employed, many expressed fear of relapse related to substance abuse. Some causes of relapse that were expected included going out on their own too early, not having stable employment, and lack of stable housing that would lead them to their lives back on the streets. The structure of their work,

such as various shiftwork and long commutes, also contributed to a fear of relapse as they prevented participants from attending and accessing support programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meetings for continued sobriety. A 34-year-old man described missing meetings due to his work hours and commute:

“The hours at my last job- 11–7 every day. Because I knew that I’m the type of person that would need a meeting during the day, 11–7 is not me going to the job and then coming home, I’m unable to get a meeting in anytime between then. Cause I’d have to get up at, where I was staying at I’d have to leave there at 8 o’clock in the morning, travel two hours to get to the job and two hours back.”

Participants also reported that the workplaces themselves encouraged relapse, as drugs and alcohol were readily accessible in those environments. A 36-year-old woman illustrated this when she said, “In the culinary industry there’s alcohol all over the place. Being surrounded by it, yeah definitely fearful of relapse.” Similarly, one 37-year-old man stated that his workplace was where he could the best drugs, saying “This might sound bad but [company omitted] has really good drugs, and [company omitted] had really good drugs I know that’s bad to say.”

Goals and Planning

Unexpectedly, many respondents reported enjoying the interviews because it made them consider many elements related to their transition to employment. A 43-year-old man described the interview, saying, “It was like going to school, made me think about stuff and that I gotta go back and rethink.”

Additionally, respondents expressed surprise and discomfort when asked about the best job they would like to get someday as it was something they never really considered or had been asked previously. One 57-year-old man said “One day? Oh, that’s a good question, the best job I would like to be . . . well . . .” Another respondent, a 30-year-old man, showed how hard it is to plan and think about their future employment “I never thought of it like that, I never went as far out as to . . .”

DISCUSSION

Overall, participants reported that these programs are beneficial and necessary, but enhancements should be made to improve

their employment and housing prospects. These participants, beneficiaries in a residential rehabilitation program, demonstrated a high level of personal accountability for their circumstances and were willing to follow rules set by others, which has been noted among the unstably housed who choose to stay in shelters.²⁶ The structure of this program is also in alignment with many other programs that treat addiction and mental illness as a root cause; these programs often ignore or diminish the importance of services, such as job training or placement, geared towards overcoming economic constraints.²⁷

While the participants in this study generally acknowledged the need for the services in addressing their history of substance abuse, many expressed frustrations about not being able to do enough to change their life circumstances that resulted in their dependency on the program for housing, clothing, and meals. There is increasing evidence that abstinence-based pathways may not be the preferred method of recovery and the focus should be on helping individuals fulfill their basic needs and increase their quality-of-life.²⁸

These participants also had extensive work histories, which is seen in other groups with substance abuse and lack of regular employment,²⁹ and implies that obtaining employment is not simply an issue of not having a job or job search skills. This aligns with evidence that participants find value in reemployment programs that reinforce life skills.¹⁸ Business ownership in areas related to their work history was expressed as a goal of many participants and may allow them to bypass some of the barriers they cited regarding employment. Offering small business ownership training may serve as an opportunity to teach life skills (such as financial management in the context of career-building) and motivate participants through building self-esteem related to their aspirations.

Addressing reemployment needs and barriers in a more direct and substantial way may be of benefit to the program and its beneficiaries. While more work needs to be done to confirm these findings, these data suggest there are significant ways to improve these programs.

Program Recommendations

Programs may consider adding an enhanced individual needs assessments early in enrollment. Ideally, this would be done with a counselor or outside party, as there could be concerns regarding confidentiality. From this initial screening, participants could be connected to services and resources most in line with their needs and goals. It may also help to identify cases that require more specialized, one-on-one intervention or areas in which sustained mentorship may be beneficial. This does not mean that every element of the program needs to be individually tailored, as there was an acknowledgment that programs are designed with the collective needs of the group in mind and that the structure offered is beneficial. Rather, it is important to recognize participants' unique experiences to provide an environment that fosters empathy and a feeling of being heard. This may help to include some principles of successful individualized placement and support models without needing as many resources.

Not only would a needs assessment offer the program a view on how to provide more comprehensive supportive services as needed and the possibility for participants to feel recognition as individuals in the program, but this practice also may serve as an opportunity for participants to conduct a self-assessment of areas they have overlooked in their personal lives. Participants in our study found the process of going through the interviews informative and helped them identify how they can better prepare for the transition back to the community. This can help the residents focus on realistic future goals and how to achieve them in a systematic manner.

While it may be convenient for individual needs assessments to be self-administered and primarily consist of closed-ended

questions, there would likely be much information missed. If the needs assessments cannot be done in-person, space for open-ended questions or comments is of critical importance. For example, when asking about confidence in their skill level, participants would comment on why they were selecting a response which would often express additional training needs or why a skill was more applicable to the line of work they were interested in. Additionally, some participants reported being affected by legal barriers only to a small degree or not at all, as they felt they worked around these barriers by simply not applying for jobs that would require a background check. Participants often shared the personal adjustments they made, but these workarounds did not expand reemployment options and failed to address some root causes.

There was discontent among participants in the uncertainty of what they could expect and when during the course of the program. To address this, transparency and clear communication are needed to articulate the expectations for the program, including at what point certain services are offered. There was also concern that communication was not uniform, with some participants receiving all the relevant information and others not. Increased transparency can improve a sense of equitable access to resources within the program and better manage expectations over time.

Policy Implications

Some jobs present real concerns to participants that may outweigh the benefit of having a job. The goal should not be simply to find reemployment. For some, the work environment exposes them to risk factors, such as access to drugs and alcohol, which could trigger a relapse. There is literature on how substance abuse can negatively impact the workplace, but more research should be done on how the workplace influences and exacerbates substance abuse. Workers should also be educated about their rights related to their protections for ongoing substance abuse treatment and policies strengthened to support employment throughout recovery.

In addition, many held the view that any job would be adequate in helping them reintegrate into the larger society. In particular, many did not understand the risks associated with temporary employment positions. Temporary work may not allow for the pathway to permanent employment, contrary to what many assumed, which would only create future instability. Longer-term access to supportive resources may help alleviate these concerns; however, participants realized there would be no supports once they were employed. Development of appropriate outcome measures that take in to account the long-term potential of employment should be considered, with funding agencies and others adopting these measures.

One element of concern is that the largest barriers and needs are often not adequately addressed. Specifically, participants indicated that legal barriers and access to basic necessities including money and housing support were fundamental issues that needed to be addressed. Programs that explicitly engage with these individuals should anticipate their needs and directly address them in their programs or collaborate with other social programs to better address these basic needs. While it may be unlikely that legal services and additional housing could be provided through every individual program, achieving program goals may be hampered by not addressing these fundamental needs. For example, programs addressing recidivism of prisoners often do not provide legal services but rather focus on life and employment skills that might benefit a wider population but are more difficult to successfully apply for former prisoners.^{22,30}

Housing status after treatment programs is highly correlated with the individual's housing status and income prior to treatment. Therefore, obtaining a job and leaving a treatment program may not be sufficient for long-term housing and economic stability.³¹ In particular, the startup costs for getting a rental, establishing

adequate credit histories, and learning to budget finances are not frequently addressed in these programs. It may result in greater program success if these structural issues receive attention. Funding agencies could consider having programs leverage other community resources to best mitigate the largest barriers.

Limitations

Individuals with unstable or a lack of housing that agree to live in shelters or rehabilitation programs are known to be different from other subgroups of those experiencing homelessness,²⁷ which may limit the generalizability of this needs assessment. Because participants in this study are already engaged in a program, it is possible that they were more invested to successfully transition back into employment; however, these are the people that transition programs are ideally designed for because a person must be ready for change.³² Additionally, this study was designed to explore a wide range of factors that impact post-program employment. While this may help to identify areas of needs that are of importance to this group, it is likely inadequate in fully informing the details of programmatic development. Also, this study is cross-sectional in nature so none of the self-reported needs or assets identified can be linked to successful employment. Perhaps the most important limitation, though, is that this research was conducted in one program in one location only. Nonetheless, the information gathered may be helpful in identifying services that are more appealing to those in this position and their implementation may facilitate meaningful outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS

Residential rehabilitation programs, such as the one in this study, are often acknowledged as a great resource to their beneficiaries. Programs often focus on employment as a crucial step in improving an individual's life circumstances. Services could be enhanced by carefully assessing the needs of each participant and allowing for some individualization of reemployment preparation that also focuses on basic needs. Where there are resource constraints in meeting needs, community partnerships could be established to create a social support network for these individuals. Programs, funding agencies, and policymakers should develop evaluation tools with metrics and emphasize actions that support long-term, sufficient employment. An area that may show promise are small business ownership training, as it was a goal of many and offers an independent route to reemployment for those with legal barriers.

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