

Alameda County's Vocational Program for Persons with Mental Illness

Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas

We've all heard that work can be the best therapy for a person with mental illness. At our September 27 meeting, **Theresa Razzano, CRC, MFT**, Director of the Alameda County Vocational Program, described how the program uses vocational rehabilitation as a major component of the recovery process, how to access its services, and how the program is spending funds available under the Mental Health Services Act, where the emphasis is on system transformation.

"The county has had a vocational program for thirty years," Razzano said. "So we've been doing it before it was chic. We've had budget cuts over the years but have never completely cut the program. We have known that employment plays a role in recovery and rehabilitation. And employment will be at the focus of the Mental Health Services Act's programs on wellness and recovery."

The program started as a "sheltered workshop" in the garage of Fairmount Hospital. Its was a single site offering people with mental illness structured work at subminimum wage, supported by a rehabilitation counselor and a job developer. That workshop closed in 1998. Now the Alameda County Vocational Program, located at 333 Hegenberger Road in Oakland—near the Oakland Airport, with access by a bus line that runs between BART's Coliseum Station and the airport—focuses on education and training, job development, and supported employment. "People in the program have tremendous experience in helping people with psychiatric illnesses go to work," Razzano said.

Alameda County's situation, with its own vocational program, is different from that of most counties in California. They usually rely on one of the twenty or so "mental health co-ops" around the state. These are collaborations between the county's mental health department and the local office of the state's Department of Rehabilitation, which works with people who have physical as well as mental disabilities.

An alternative to the Alameda County Vocational Program is the Oakland Townhouse of Bay Area Community Services (BACS). This is a single facility that offers people with mental illness jobs connected with its assisted living program, such as gardening, cooking, and work with computers. BACS receives funding through Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services.



THERESA RAZZANO, CRC, MFT

The Vocational Program offers a wider choice of jobs, including education and educational support, transitional employment, and competitive employment. The program has met its annual goal this year, Razzano said, of placing 60 people in jobs, out of 360 clients in the agency.

The program's intake and provision of services follows this pattern:

1. The individual gets a **referral** to the Vocational Program from Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services—whether from one of the service teams, as a transition-age youth, from a psychiatrist in the county system, or through one of the substance abuse programs. Right now, anyone who is a county resident can be referred, but soon access will be limited to people taking services through Alameda County Behavioral Health. “This is part of a shift under the Mental Health Services Act to focus resources on people with the least access to help and the most need,” Razzano said.
2. The person fills out a **referral form** with name, address, diagnosis according to the axes in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition* (DSM-IV), and other personal information. If necessary, the program will start the process to get the person registered with the California Department of Rehabilitation, which may take some time. This step involves meeting with one of the program's counselors.
3. The counselor then invites the person to a two-hour **orientation meeting** held on the second and fourth Thursdays of the month, 2 to 4 p.m. This will tell the person what to expect from the Vocational Program.
4. The person takes a **Career Exploration Class**, which meets five hours a week for three to four weeks. This class helps the person perform a skills inventory and assessment and includes talk with a job coach about the kind of work he or she wants to do. The outcome of the class is a concrete set of short- and long-term goals.
5. If the person is not ready for full-time work, he or she can sign up for **casual employment**, which usually means half days on an irregular basis.
6. Otherwise, the counselor tries to find the person a position in **transitional employment**, which is usually a 90-day program with public agencies such as the library or the local blood bank. The program is paid for by the federal government.
7. Then the person goes into job developmental and is placed in **competitive employment**. The Vocational Program's job developers are like salespeople—and many of them have done former work in sales—stumping the job market, making cold calls, looking for jobs that may be available to clients.

“Most of our clients are people who have been out of the job market for a while,” Razzano said. “Or they may lack social or job skills. So it's best to start with the Career Exploration Class. There the job developer can work with the person to find out what he or she wants. And, of course, at any point the person can say ‘I quit’ and drop out—and they can still come back.

“Wellness and recovery are about taking a job when the person is ready. Some people come back several times. Each work experience builds for the next one.”

Q. How long do people keep their jobs in your program?

A. Most stay a year or longer. The program sends a job coach along with the individual to help him or her understand the job, its priorities, the tasks assigned—whatever it takes to help the person keep that job. The coach usually is 100% available for the first month or two, tapering off to 80% to 60%, and eventually spending about 20% of the time for monitoring and maintenance of the individual.

Q. What kind of jobs are they? Good jobs?

A. A lot depends on the person's background, education, and training. We have entry-level retail, forklift drivers, work at the blood bank, professional positions—even one person with a master's in science who is employed at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory.

Q. Can people choose to work part time? Otherwise, how can they protect their Social Security benefits?

A. People can choose part time, but the program works with people who have a desire to work. Some jobs offer 20 hours per week. There is also the category of transitional employment, which lets the person try different situations and tasks without taking competitive employment.

Unlike some agencies, it is not a Vocational Program goal to get the person off Supplemental Security Income (SSI), which is a Social Security Administration program. A person on SSI can work and still get benefits: the first \$85 of monthly income is ignored, and thereafter the benefit grant is reduced by \$1 for every \$2 that the person earns. So if he or she earns \$500, the benefit is only reduced by \$250. And the benefit is still available if there's a relapse. These are different terms from Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI).

“In order to have wellness and recovery,” Razzano said, “a person needs to get education and employment. It's no longer acceptable to have people sitting around talking about how ill they are. To the extent that a person can, working with as much motivation as he or she may have available adds value to the recovery experience.”