

## Individual Placement and Support Services

*Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas*

At the January 22 educational meeting, trainers **Martin Pacheco** and **Christopher Lloriente** from the Vocational Services Division of Alameda County Behavioral Health shared information about supportive services for clients motivated to work. They discussed actionable strategies, grounded in the evidence-based Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model, enabling case managers and providers to facilitate meaningful, competitive employment outcomes.

Pacheco has been with the Alameda County program for 15 years. He has seen vocational services shift from the old rehabilitation model of assessment, vocational testing, skills-building workshops, and employment in sheltered and volunteer positions, to the IPS model of rapid, individualized employment in competitive, paid positions. Lloriente, who early on worked in financial services, moved to Bay Area Community Services (BACS) as an employment specialist and has worked with the county for the last nine years. The IPS employment specialists work in a team with service providers, case managers, and housing specialists to meet the consumer's individual needs.

IPS is evidence based, proven in 32 controlled studies that compared its principles with traditional, rehabilitation-oriented vocational programs and involved people with serious mental illness and substance abuse. Participants in the IPS programs had a mean employment rate of 55% compared to 25% for the traditional programs. The program is also effective for people with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mental illness after the first psychotic break, and older adults. It is now being investigated for helping with people with autism, spinal cord and brain injuries, chronic pain, and refugee status.

Employment and education are social determinants of health. They are viewed as an essential part of mental health recovery as well as a typical role for adults. Less than 10% of mental health consumers in California work, but 60% to 70% express interest in working. Employment increases a person's income, self-esteem, social networks, quality of life, and control of symptoms, while reducing hospitalization, substance use, and use of mental health services. Conversely, unemployment in the general population increases substance abuse, physical problems, apathy, alienation, and psychiatric disorders, while reducing self-esteem and social contacts.

IPS is a strength-based approach to wellness and recovery, focusing on a client's personal characteristics, past experiences, resources, and support network. The program has eight basic principles:

**Open to anyone who wants to work:** Eligibility is based on the consumer's choice, and people are not excluded because of their diagnosis, recent hospitalizations, criminal justice history, or work readiness. However, the Vocational Services Division limits participation to Alameda County residents who are eligible for Medi-Cal and have a severe mental illness—which means they are likely already participants in Alameda County Behavioral Health's programs.

**Focus on competitive employment:** The IPS specialists help people find jobs in the open labor market that pay the same as others in similar positions, including part- and full-time jobs. Clients are not steered into sheltered jobs set aside for people with disabilities but work in settings with others who do not have disabilities.

**Rapid job search:** The specialists help people begin looking for jobs within one month of starting the program. Pre-employment assessment, training, and counseling are not required and are kept to a minimum. People explore the world of work at a pace that's right for them.

**Targeted job development:** The IPS specialists build relationships with local employers to learn about their needs and identify openings for qualified job candidates. They make multiple visits, averaging six face-to-face contacts with hiring managers per week.

**Individual preferences guide decisions:** The job search is based on the individual's preferences, strengths, and work experience, not on a pool of readily available jobs. Job seekers indicate their preferences for type of work, hours, and job supports.

**Individualized long-term supports:** The specialists provide support for as long as needed and desired, without arbitrary time limits. The support is based on the person's needs and designed to promote a positive work experience. The IPS specialists help the person with job changes, career advancement, and additional schooling and training.

**IPS is integrated with treatment:** The IPS specialists meet at least weekly with providers serving the same group of people, including care coordinators, therapists, medication providers, and housing specialists. They review client status and plan coordinated, recovery-oriented services.

**Personalized benefits counseling:** The specialists refer people for comprehensive, individualized benefits planning with trained experts so they can make informed decisions about starting or changing jobs. The Center for Independent Living (CIL) provides consultation on specialized work incentives for IPS participants and those eligible for services.

The IPS program is primarily funded with Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) money but also bills Medi-Cal and has revenue on a fee-for-services basis from the Department of Rehabilitation. The program is reviewed for Medi-Cal compliance and by the MHSA and other agencies. The program provides supported employment and education services to 255 consumers per year and has a 42% to 50% employment rate.

In addition to employment and education services, the program provides technical and training assistance to employers, community-based organizations (CBOs), and providers. Alameda County Behavioral Health also provides county-operated vocational services to the county's clinics and to various CBOs such as BACS.

The strengths of the county's vocational services program are fielding a seasoned staff that know the work, having clinical partners that now expect clients to get jobs and go to school, and seeing employment and education as helping change client's lives. The challenges include building staff back from post-pandemic vacancies, increasing referrals, and struggling with stigma and misconceptions about benefits.

Families can help by sharing their back-to-work stories and providing support with clothing and transportation.