

RECOVERY

*The official newsletter of the
Fletcher Group Rural Center Of Excellence*



Meaningful.
EMPLOYMENT



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EMPLOYMENT'S ROLE IN RURAL RECOVERY

By Founder and Chief Medical Officer Dr. Ernie Fletcher

Recovery is more than remaining abstinent. It's a multi-factorial, non-linear process requiring the development of numerous "recovery capital" resources. Employment is one of the most important, not only because it pays the bills and takes up to a third of our waking lives but because it's crucial to building the pride, confidence, and life skills needed to stay the course.

But finding it can be challenging, especially in rural areas. Our June newsletter noted that stigma towards people who use illicit opioids is higher among rural residents than urban residents, even when those people are close friends or family members, and that getting treatment can make someone an "outsider" who's "less welcome to marry into a family, move in next door, and share time or work together."

Rural areas tend also to have fewer job opportunities due to lower business growth and less access to childcare. And because rural populations trend older, inexperience with computers and the modern workplace can create additional barriers.

We hope this issue's 'deep dive' into meaningful employment sheds light on the many benefits, challenges, and opportunities that make it so important to rural residents in recovery.

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THE BENEFITS ARE REAL

"Employment is one of the best predictors of positive treatment outcome," says recovery expert Alexandre Laudet.* Benefits include "lower rates of relapse, less criminal activity, and fewer parole violations among employed compared to unemployed persons."

"Securing employment is not only one of society's priorities for SUD-affected persons," says Laudet. "It is also consistently cited as a top priority by SUD-affected individuals at all stages of recovery."

But why? There are many reasons. One is finally having something to lose. "By providing something valued that can be lost to active addiction (i.e., relapse), employment can strengthen commitment to recovery," says one study.†

Another reason: the relief of no longer being an outcast. "Clients see working as equivalent to normalcy, being a part of society, doing what adults do, being 'something' and 'somebody.' Not working is seen as being 'nothing'."‡

But there are many other reasons:

Economic Benefits. Employment provides a legitimate, stable source of income allowing people to meet their basic needs for economic survival, independence, self-empowerment, and inter-relatedness.

Social Reintegration. Employment promotes social engagement and community involvement whereby people can express themselves and be listened to, build relationships both social and professional, and meet new people who don't use drugs and can thus serve as healthy role models.

Therapeutic Benefits. The predictable schedules and daily routines of being employed create much-needed stability, structure and accountability. It also keeps people busy and engaged so they have less time to dwell on the past or become bored, anxious, or depressed.

Just as important, being able to witness one's contributions and importance to others promotes self-efficacy and a sense that there's meaning and purpose to life, all of which contributes to confidence, self-esteem, pride, wellbeing and happiness. Apathy is replaced with the feeling that, "I deserve a better life and am justified in working for it."



Recommended Reading

For an evidence-based guide regarding how to best support sustained recovery through the use of employment: SAMHSA's *Substance Use Disorders Recovery With A Focus on Employment and Education*.

For a detailed explanation of how the the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) addresses addiction to alcohol, illegal drugs, and the unlawful use of legal drugs: *The ADA, Addiction, Recovery, and Employment* on the Americans with Disabilities Act website.

For an overview of the current legal obligations of employers and employees: *Sharing the Dream: Is the ADA Accommodating All? Chapter 4: Substance Abuse under the ADA*.

* Rate and Predictors of Employment Among Formerly Polysubstance-Dependent Individuals in Recovery

† Work as a Rehabilitative Tool for Individuals with Dual Diagnosis

‡ Work As A Critical Component of Recovery (Wright State University)

FOR EMPLOYERS, TOO!

Many employers fear that people in recovery will threaten their business success. In reality, they often offer a variety of unique strengths not found in others.

Work Ethic

Many who've been called weak because of their addiction combat the stigma by pushing themselves harder, including at work. In addition, the life skills learned in therapy and support groups—including persistence, honesty, open-mindedness, and the ability to communicate—can be of tremendous value in the workplace.

Productivity

Motivated to exceed expectations, many people in recovery work harder, record higher attendance, and stay longer with their company.

Economy

When employers take hiring and training costs into account, it's often less expensive to support an employee through recovery than to lose them.

Loyalty

Having a second chance at life can translate into extreme gratitude, loyalty, and dedication. Because the company betters their lives so greatly, they dedicate themselves to bettering the company.

A Constructive Workplace

Employees in recovery are dedicated to showing up sober and ready for work each day. They also watch out for one another, hold each other accountable, watch for signs of reuse, and pick up shifts for anyone who's struggling—a degree of teamwork that's not easy to find.

Larger Applicant Pool

Because they're so connected, hiring a person in recovery can quickly introduce an employer to a multitude of grateful, loyal, and hardworking employees.

Assistance

Numerous Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are available to help employers offset the risks of investing in those in recovery while Supported Employment Programs (SEPs) can supplement the first-year salary of a participating candidate, allowing employers to land a dream candidate while also saving money and receiving valuable training services.



Recommended Reading

To learn how employers can prevent discrimination against those with substance use issues: *[Accommodating Workers with a History of Substance Abuse](#)* by Lisa Nagele-Piazza on the SHRM Foundation website.

For unemployed clients in substance use treatment who face obstacles obtaining and keeping jobs: *[Integrating Substance Abuse Treatment and Vocational Services](#)*, part of the Treatment Improvement Protocols (TIPs) provided by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

For help preparing for interviews and jobs, including sources for outside assistance: *[Back On Track: Employment During Recovery](#)* by the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA.

SO ARE THE CHALLENGES

Despite the many significant benefits listed on the previous pages, unemployment remains a challenge. Employment rates for SUD adults in treatment remain low with fewer than one-third (31%) employed.*

Chicken Or Egg?

Does drug use lead to joblessness? Or does unemployment lead to drug use? The answer is complicated and case-by-case. But we do know this: people who are unemployed tend to face financial hardship or, at the minimum, have more unstructured time which can make them vulnerable to reuse.

Barriers

Some challenges are environmental. For example, in rural communities there may be fewer employment opportunities and less access to childcare, workforce training, and continuing education. The low pay and poor benefits offered by many of the jobs available to people in recovery may also play a part.†

Stigma

Though the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and other government protections like the ADA were created to prevent discrimination, studies consistently rank substance use disorders among the most stigmatized conditions, comparable to HIV/AIDS, mental disorders, or prior justice system involvement. According to one study, “20 percent of the employment gap and 30 percent of the wage gap is unexplained by functional limitations and other productivity-related variables and potentially attributed to stigma-related discrimination by employers.”‡

No Escape

Even those in long-term recovery may experience adverse employment outcomes because of discrimination or stigma.§ The taboo associated with drug use is so ingrained that many people who support drug policy reform still hold negative stereotypes. This is true even among health professionals, many of whom believe that people with substance use disorders are more interested in taking drugs than improving their health. This can cause those in recovery to hide their underlying medical concerns and not take advantage of the tools and medications otherwise available to them. Employed people with a history of drug use also tend to “misreport” when answering drug-use surveys for fear that their confession will be passed on to their employers. Employed



adults might also be reluctant to take time off from work to obtain treatment or support services.

Age Discrimination

According to another study, older people in recovery encounter even greater barriers to employment due to a lack of computer knowledge and/or an inability to manage interpersonal relationships in the modern workplace.†

Rural Challenges

Though no research has yet been done regarding employment among substance users in rural areas, the same issues that create other health challenges in sparsely populated areas—lack of quality healthcare and privacy issues when “everybody knows everybody”—can easily exacerbate all the challenges described above.

* The DASIS Report: Employment Status and Substance Abuse Treatment Admissions, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

† Barriers to Employment among Unemployed Drug Users: Age Predicts Severity, Sigurdsson, Ring, O'Reilly, Silverman

‡ Job Loss Discrimination and Former Substance Use Disorders, Baldwin, Marcus, De Simone

§ An Investigation of Stigma in Individuals Receiving Treatment for Substance Abuse, Luoma, Twohig, Waltz, Hayes, Roget, Padilla, Fisher

WHAT WE'RE DOING

Meaningful employment is a key goal of the “Recovery Ecosystem” model promoted by the Fletcher Group Rural Center Of Excellence. Activities are divided into three categories: on-the-job training, more traditional vocational education programs, and entrepreneurial training. A good example of the latter is an innovative program that has helped rural residents of five Eastern Kentucky recovery centers find a new sense of self-worth and purpose by providing them with the skills and resources to start their own businesses.

“There’s an abundance of talent within the recovery community,” says Fletcher Group Director of Employment Services Lori Baier, “and gaining new entrepreneurial skills has really let that talent shine.”

The program came about through an innovative partnership between the Southeast Kentucky Economic Development Corporation (SKED), the Eastern Kentucky Concentrated Employment Program (EKCEP) and the Fletcher Group. After four weeks of online training by SKED Small Business Training Director Amanda Kelly, six teams from five residences developed original business plans and then pitched them to a panel of judges who were suitably impressed by the creativity, research, and detail that went into each.

According to Kelly, the partnership with EKCEP and The Fletcher Group exemplifies how new skills can be mastered to grow a business and create meaningful employment. “I’m just so proud and excited to see where these exciting new ideas take the participants,” says Kelly.

“By exploring opportunities, setting goals and making plans, they learned what it takes to be an entrepreneur and small business owner,” said Baier. “It gave them something to get excited about and feel proud of and allowed them to give back to their residences by sharing the profits with them.”

Some residence managers initially feared that starting a business might be distracting or too expensive, says Baier. “But I knew if they gave us a chance, they’d see that learning to run a business is an enhancement, not a distraction.” As for replicating the training program elsewhere, Baier suggests that RH operators explore training options by contacting their local economic development agency, workforce board, small business association, or community college.

“This is one of the projects I’m most proud of,” says Kelly. “Providing this type of training can make all the difference for people struggling to get back on their feet.”



Lori Baier, Director Of Employment Services

TRAINEE QUOTES

“Exactly what I needed to fulfill my dreams.”

“For the first time, I feel like I can succeed in life.”

“I’m a better asset to the community, thanks to this program.”

“It helped me step outside my comfort zone and grow in ways I couldn’t have otherwise.”

“I got more from this than I can put into words.”

“It showed we can accomplish anything we set our minds to and that there are people in this world who believe in us.”

“Words can’t begin to describe how great this has been.”