

TCA Papers

Integrating Vocational Services within Therapeutic Community Treatment

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ABSTRACT: Substance abuse and unemployment are inextricably linked. Substance abusers are more likely to be unemployed than non-addicted individuals. Substance abusers face an array of psychological, educational and interpersonal barriers which hinder their pursuit of vocational opportunities. Vocational assistance includes vocational guidance, career identification and development, career counseling and skills acquisition. Skills classification assessment strategies are used to clarify occupational choice, to interpret work histories and to identify adaptive and maladaptive vocational development. Research validates the notion that employment is essential for long-term successful social rehabilitation of substance abusers. Gainful employment has also been linked to treatment retention, improved self-esteem and reduced criminal activity. Integration of comprehensive vocational services within substance abuse treatment programs can produce positive client outcomes, prevent recidivism and enhance client quality of life. This article describes a comprehensive vocational and job placement component integrated within a residential therapeutic community program.

Introduction

Employment is an extremely important public, social and economic activity. The ability to engage in meaningful employment requires that a number of physical, social and intellectual capabilities be learned, developed and practiced. Different occupations require different intellectual and social behaviors, which

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range from the simple details of dress, grooming and speech to the more complex skills required to work well with peers, employees and supervisors.

Substance abuse disorders and unemployment are often intertwined. Individuals who abuse substances face a myriad of psychosocial, educational and interpersonal barriers that hinder their ability to pursue even the most fundamental vocational opportunities. In addition to the personal limitations of poor work skills and psychological deficits, individuals who abuse substances often face social barriers resulting from employer attitudes, competitive labor markets and an inability to access appropriate vocational services (Sheridan 1995; Owen & Bloom 1995; Taylor 1996, 1998, 2003).

Traditionally, in the USA, vocational services have not been a part of substance abuse treatment services. Instead, the two types of service have operated as separate systems of care, characterized by distinct goals, language, rules and service strategies. Traditional vocational specialists have found substance-abusing individuals to be a difficult group to work with because of their poor work habits, sporadic attendance and marginal compliance with vocational plans.

Substance abuse treatment programs have an opportunity to redesign services so that vocational rehabilitation can be integrated into a comprehensive treatment system. If the eventual goal of treatment is to return the former substance-abusing individual to the community, program success should be measured by the clients' ability to abstain from illicit drug use and criminal activity and to obtain a job that satisfies their financial needs (Pittel 1977; Taylor 1996, 1998, 2003).

Center Point's Three-Phase Program

Center Point, Inc., in San Rafael, California, has successfully infused vocational preparation and job development services into the core curriculum of its treatment programs. Originally implemented in 1982, the vocational re-entry component is continually redesigned to accommodate the changing service needs of clients. The goals of the program are to improve the overall health, social functioning and economic wellbeing of the participants through individualized and culturally-appropriate services.

Center Point's residential treatment programs are six months in duration, with services grouped into three distinct, though overlapping, phases: an intensive psycho-educational treatment phase, a re-entry skills-building phase and a transitional community phase. The program teaches problem-solving skills to ensure pro-social adaptation with an emphasis on enhancing the client's self-esteem and self-worth. A brief description of the three phases is provided below.

Phase I: Intensive psycho-educational treatment (60 to 90 days)

During the treatment-intensive phase, clients are challenged to examine personal feelings, addictive behaviors and short- and long-term goals through

group counseling sessions, weekly individualized written assignments and discussions with counselors. Beginning with this phase and continuing throughout treatment, clients are given life-skills training and the opportunities to practice these new skills.

Phase II: Re-entry-skills building (30 to 60 days)

The major emphasis of this phase is to find appropriate jobs for the clients and begin the transition to community living. During this two-month phase, vocational and supportive counseling services are provided and clients actively seek employment. Once they are placed in jobs, clients work during the day and engage in therapeutic activities in the evenings and on weekends. Education and training, including the demonstration of value-based concepts that have been taught, are components of this phase.

Phase III: Community reintegration (30 to 60 days)

In the final or transitional phase of treatment, clients begin reintegration into the community. Weekly groups focus on work issues such as motivation, attendance, time schedules, working conditions and interactions with supervisors. Clients and staff also work to resolve legal obligations (e.g. community service hours, custody issues) during this phase. Clients are encouraged to build strong peer affiliations and increase their social skills through participation in transitional support groups. The program also helps clients to identify and develop other supports, such as extended family, friends, religious communities, ethnic and cultural heritages and community services. The key components of transitional services include social skills training, educational services, vocational services and training to enhance quality of life.

Continued participation in vocational services during the transitional phase allows clients to discuss their experiences on the job. During this phase, clients use role-playing exercises to help them deal with stressful workplace situations such as substance use, friction among employees, disagreements with supervisors, performance evaluations and rule violations. The program uses money management workshops to teach clients how to live within their means. Vocational support groups help ameliorate the temptation to follow old patterns and to develop strategies to cope with anxiety and fear of success.

Comprehensive vocational services

Vocational services are provided during Phases II and III of treatment. These services span a wide range of activities designed to help clients cope with vocational decisions and problems. The program provides vocational guidance, career development, career counseling and skills training. Vocational assistance, skills classification and related assessment batteries are used to clarify occupational choices, interpret previous work histories, understand the

special problems of clients and explain adaptive and maladaptive vocational development to clients.

Maladaptive vocational development is defined as the failure to develop a vocational identity or to establish a career in a congruent occupation. Maladaptive career development occurs because of one or more of the following aspects of the client's circumstances:

- insufficient experience to acquire interests and competencies
- insufficient knowledge about major occupational choices
- ambiguous or conflicting experiences about interests and skills
- conflicting information about work settings
- intrapersonal deficiencies that hinder the actualization of goals, alienated outlook toward work and psychosocial issues
- lack of personal, educational, or financial resources to implement vocational goals
- economic or social barriers, which inhibit job acquisition.

Center Point's comprehensive vocational services group assistance into three distinct but contiguous clusters: (1) testing and work skills evaluation, (2) pre-employment training and (3) placement and follow-up. Each of these components is described below.

(1) Testing and work skills evaluation

Testing and work skills evaluation identifies aptitudes, interests, previous experience, educational level and vocational assistance needs. Evaluation interviews appraise individual strengths and weaknesses in areas critical to employment. Issues such as medical history, work history, educational history, access to transportation, criminal records and long- and short-range vocational training are considered.

The program uses several vocational instruments and inventories to develop individual vocational plans. These inventories include the Kuder Occupational Interest Survey (Science Research Associates 1997), the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory (National Computer Systems 1971), the Jackson Vocational Interest Survey (Jackson 1977), the Self-Directed Search (Holland 1985) and differential aptitude tests, such as the General Aptitude Test Battery (US Department of Labor 1970).

After assessment, the client's vocational objectives are developed. A good starting point is the stated interests of the client. In the absence of articulated interests, the standard expectations for employees in different jobs can help narrow the field. When provisional objectives have been identified, goal feasibility is determined by considering such issues as the availability of jobs, the availability of training, the client's skills and aptitude level, individual motivation, personal attributes, and emotional and financial resources.

Testing and evaluation activities take approximately four hours per evaluation unless extreme deficits require supplemental interviews. Counselors develop a vocational plan after face-to-face interviews, case evaluation and case

clinical reviews have been conducted. This vocational plan takes into account the availability of employment or training programs; the skills, aptitude and motivation of the individual; and the person's unique attributes. The plan incorporates primary and secondary vocational objectives, a clear action strategy, a graduated plan for growth and the identification of situational barriers (e.g. need for childcare, transportation, housing) that may require attention.

(2) Pre-employment training

Clients receive pre-employment (or 'job search') training through a series of group and/or individual sessions. This step is critical in helping clients gain confidence and resist the pressure to resort to former patterns of coping or settling for traditionally low wage jobs. The goals of pre-employment training are to:

- reduce pessimism and build self-confidence
- develop work-related values, social skills and ethics
- confront unrealistic expectations
- foster self-reliance and vocational preparation
- translate interests, skills and values into job objectives
- formulate a job search strategy
- research potential employers
- learn to write a functional resume and cover letter
- fill out employment applications
- practice job interview techniques (e.g. grooming, recognizing appropriate dress, understanding personal disclosure).

(3) Placement and follow-up

Follow-up activities occur once employment has begun. They are intended to support the client in worksite adjustment, to mediate on-the-job issues and to foster relationships with employers. These activities may include one or more of the following:

- ongoing contact with employers
- surveying potential future jobs
- client advocacy
- countering employer stereotypes
- offering consultation and meditation
- evaluating client adjustment to a new work environment
- providing onsite counseling/case management
- assessing job satisfaction/job training.

Active, regular support and follow-up augment vocational placement. Center Point has found that getting a job is usually not difficult for clients. Rather, the difficulty is in keeping the job. Follow-up support groups assist clients when self-doubt, dejection, frustration and boredom begin to set in. Often, conflicts

begin to emerge once a job has been obtained and a routine of work has been established. It is during these critical periods that individuals may resume old relationships and fall quickly into familiar, negative patterns of doubt and uncertainty.

It is critical for clients to develop job-seeking skills such as learning how to locate potential jobs, research companies and/or industries, contact the correct party and schedule an interview. Center Point teaches participants how to search for jobs using such resources as the State Employment Development Department, the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, private employment agencies, temporary agencies and various community-based services.

Throughout the placement phase, staff members meet with clients to discuss experiences, to offer feedback, to identify potential relapse cues (e.g. rejection, fear of failure) and to develop relapse prevention strategies.

Once a participant is employed, follow-up services help with job retention, job changes and opportunities for advancement. Follow-up activities include visiting jobsites regularly to observe employees, interview supervisors, provide additional training, assess an employee's progress, solicit supervisor evaluations and assess the client's satisfaction with employment.

Conclusions

Evaluation findings suggest that Center Point's treatment programs have succeeded in helping a significant number of individuals to overcome addiction, regain custody of their children, maintain steady employment and engage in pro-social activities

A successful work experience not only provides financial rewards and enhanced self-esteem, but also serves as a critical link in the bridge from treatment to the community. The productive environment of a worksite with a routine, a set of values and a code of expected conduct provides valuable rewards as well as a pro-social support system.

Work also provides a structure in which there is a prescribed set of tasks, objectives and activities, as well as opportunities to develop new friends and to belong to a new social group. In addition to assisting to successfully integrate into the community, jobs that provide personal satisfaction also help to prevent relapse to substance use and involvement with the criminal justice system.

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