

# Getting Families on Their Feet

## Steps for Integrating Employment Programming into Homeless Services

by Caitlin C. Schnur and Chris Warland

*With this article, UNCENSORED introduces a new kind of feature in the magazine, one that will offer specific advice to those serving homeless and struggling families. The practices described below may already be part of some providers' programs, but we feel that this article by representatives of the Chicago-based National Transitional Jobs Network (NTJN) is a comprehensive guide to integrating employment into homeless services.*

*The NTJN is a Chicago-based national coalition dedicated to helping people with barriers to employment, including people experiencing homelessness, succeed in the workforce. The NTJN's Working to End Homelessness (WEH) Initiative aims to highlight the role employment can play in preventing and alleviating housing instability. As a part of the WEH Initiative, the NTJN convened a national Community of Practice of workforce-development professionals from more than 20 programs serving individuals with barriers to employment, including St. Patrick Center in St. Louis, Missouri, and Blue Mountain Action Council (BMAC) in Walla Walla, Washington. These programs worked alongside the NTJN for almost a year to share their best employment practices, identify challenges to their work, and create effective employment solutions for people experiencing homelessness.*

Gene, an honorably discharged army veteran with a young daughter, had a job with a tree-service company and owned a home. But when Gene's income dropped after his work hours were cut back, his home fell into disrepair and he and his daughter found themselves without a place of their own to live. Like so many families experiencing homelessness, Gene

and his daughter "doubled up" with family and friends to avoid having to sleep on the streets or enter the shelter system.

That was when Gene heard about St. Patrick Center, a nonprofit organization in St. Louis that provides housing, employment opportunities, and health services for people who are experiencing

or at risk of homelessness. Gene turned to St. Patrick Center for support.

Recognizing his need for employment with family-sustaining wages, Gene's new case managers placed him in St. Patrick Center's Veterans GO! Green program, which provides veterans with paid job-training opportunities in sustainable horticulture, landscape management, and recycling and waste management.

While in training, Gene received an offer for a full-time job with a family-owned business that buys, processes, and sells scrap iron and steel. Still employed with them over three years later, Gene strives to arrive early, never miss a day, and advance in his position—and his commitment to workplace success has been recognized and rewarded by his employer.

With full-time work and a stable income, Gene and his daughter have moved into their own apartment. Gene is saving money to purchase a pickup truck and his own lawn-service equipment, and he is thrilled to be able to provide for his daughter's extracurricular gymnastics training—as well as maintain safe, stable housing.

Gene's story is an example of why employment and earned income are critical for ending the pervasive problem of family homelessness in the U.S. On a single night in January 2013, 222,197 people in families—including 130,515 children—were experiencing homelessness. This point-in-time count likely underestimates the number of families that lack places to live, because it does not account for families, like Gene's, that are in doubled-up situations or otherwise at imminent risk of being without homes.

While families experiencing homelessness are by no means homogeneous, they are most often made up of single mothers in their twenties with young children. Insufficient earned income leaves many of these families unable to maintain housing. Most people experiencing homelessness say they want to work and believe that earned income would help them become and remain housed. When asked, they frequently rank paid work as their primary need. Nancy Yohe, senior director of employment and veteran services at St. Patrick Center, has seen this in her own practice: "Many people [experiencing homelessness] will come to us saying that they just want a job, and that they'll do anything." City leaders also agree that poverty and unemployment are among the leading causes of family homelessness in their communities. Connecting homeless adults to stable, earned income through employment is a critical tool in the ongoing fight to alleviate and end family homelessness.

As critical as employment is, heads of households experiencing or at risk of homelessness are likely to face barriers to employment such as low educational attainment, limited work-related skills, and irregular work histories. Other factors—such as poor physical or mental health, domestic violence, or simply having exhausted the support of friends and family—also increase the risk of family homelessness and may act as further barriers to getting and keeping jobs.

Fortunately, research has shown that when offered individualized employment, housing, and supportive-service options, people experiencing homelessness can surmount barriers to employment and find and keep jobs. Heads of households experiencing homelessness also have diverse strengths, such as past work experience and a desire to care for their children,

A man participates in St. Patrick Center's Building Employment Skills for Tomorrow (BEST) on-the-job-training program for people experiencing homelessness.



that can be leveraged to help them succeed in the world of work. There is a tremendous opportunity for those who serve people experiencing homelessness to prioritize employment as a pathway to stable housing and offer clients comprehensive employment programming.

### Integrating Employment into Homeless Services

“Having a job is vital to becoming self-sufficient,” says Michelle Goodwin, workforce development specialist at Blue Mountain Action Council (BMAC), a nonprofit organization serving low-income people in Walla Walla since 1964. “At BMAC, we’ve offered employment programming since our opening day.” Like BMAC and St. Patrick Center, any group serving people experiencing homelessness, whether a shelter, supportive housing program, or health care provider, can take steps to help its clients find and keep good jobs—and many of these steps can be taken immediately and at little or no additional cost.

The first option to consider is **partnership**, a practice embraced by both BMAC and St. Patrick Center. As Goodwin points out, “By partnering with outside organizations, BMAC can provide wraparound services that use the skills and services of different agencies to help participants.” Chances are that other organizations in a provider’s area offer services to people with barriers to employment. In some cases this will be the local public workforce center, perhaps called a One-Stop Career Center or American Job Center. One of St. Patrick Center’s food-service training programs is housed in its local public workforce center, and BMAC’s Goodwin is at her local center twice a week. “I’m involved in the job club we have over there, and we partner in teaching classes,” Goodwin explains. “I also refer participants to workshops where they can learn about writing résumés and cover letters and build job-interviewing skills.” In the majority of cases, the most effective partner may be a community- or faith-based organization. Often, these partnerships can be mutually beneficial, especially those between housing and employment programs: an employment service provider may take job-seeker referrals from an organization that provides housing and refer individuals in need of housing assistance. While memoranda of understanding (MOUs), or formal agreements between organizations, are sometimes useful, often such partnerships are informal.

Program staff can also begin **introducing employment as a goal** for clients during routine interactions, counseling sessions, and discussions of individualized plans. **Motivational interviewing**, an evidence-based counseling method that strengthens an individual’s determination to change his or her behavior, can help clients who are ambivalent about pursuing

employment recognize that a job is important for achieving personal goals—and help the individual commit to a job search. Goodwin is an enthusiastic proponent of motivational interviewing, which allows clients to recognize their own strengths and work with their case managers to create plans rather than simply being told what to do. Yohe, also an advocate of motivational interviewing, is excited that St. Patrick Center is exploring ways to integrate the practice into its employment programming. “Motivational interviewing is the key to engagement,” Yohe says. “Using open-ended questions, reflecting, and normalizing clients’ experiences—all of those techniques help us improve our services to clients.” Finally, it is best to begin offering employment assistance, including a range of options for how to pursue employment, when the individual expresses a desire to work.

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For relatively little cost, programs can offer **basic job-search assistance**, such as hosting on-site classes in résumé writing or interview skills. Debbie Huwe, who works in BMAC’s transitional-housing program, says that she and her colleagues try to provide basic job-search preparation to all of BMAC’s housing clients, including those who haven’t been referred to one of BMAC’s more intensive employment programs. “We’re not job specialists, but once a month we have a life-skills class and some of what we teach is work-related skills. We’ll work on résumé building and mock interviewing,” she says. If it is not feasible to offer job-search assistance classes on-site, staff members or volunteers may be able to help job seekers search online postings or fill out electronic applications. “One of our volunteers will call employers and see if they have openings, and then put together a sheet of local opportunities, and another volunteer helps with one-on-one mock interviews and applications,” says Yohe.

By **providing the basic tools for conducting a job search** on-site, providers can lower the barriers to beginning to look for a job. For example, Internet-connected computers and

telephones can facilitate self-directed job-search activities. “We have 16 computers where clients can conduct an on-line job search and check e-mail,” says Yohe. Also, setting up dedicated phone lines or connecting clients to Community Voice Mail—a service that gives participants private, ten-digit phone numbers that go to personalized voice mail boxes where they can receive messages—provide ways for prospective employers to respond to applications without revealing that applicants are staying in shelters or supportive housing.

If an organization is willing and able to provide more intensive employment programming in-house, one practical next step would be to **dedicate staff** in employment-services roles, as both St. Patrick Center and BMAC do. “My position is job coordinator,” Goodwin explains. “I work with agencies in town to help people get employment but also gain work experience and training. Sometimes I act as a job coach, helping with résumés and interviewing skills. I may also check in with supervisors to see how people who have found jobs are progressing and the new skills they’re learning.”

Organizations may consider committing staff to roles in job development, job coaching, and work-readiness training. Job development involves reaching out to employers, identifying work opportunities, and matching those opportunities to clients’ interests and skills. Job coaching means developing individualized employment plans and guiding participants through the process of becoming and remaining employed. Work-readiness courses develop an understanding of basic job-related concepts such as punctuality, personal presentation, and effective workplace communication. In small employment initiatives a single staff member sometimes fills these roles; in larger programs they are typically specialized roles.

When organizations have secured sufficient resources to support more intensive employment programming, they can look to **proven models** such as transitional jobs or supported employment, also known as individual placement and support (IPS). These intensive interventions, which are more effective for helping job seekers with multiple or serious barriers to employment find and keep jobs, require more long-term planning, staffing, and resource development for successful implementation.

**Peer learning** relationships with other providers can play an important role in developing new employment-services

## » PROGRAM EXAMPLES

### » Blue Mountain Action Council (BMAC), Walla Walla, Washington

Blue Mountain Action Council (BMAC) takes an integrated, individualized approach to serving families experiencing or at risk of homelessness. At BMAC, clients are offered rapid access to transitional housing with rent support for up to two years. Once families are in transitional housing, staff use motivational interviewing to engage heads of households in employment and supportive services that best meet their families’ needs and self-sufficiency goals, which are documented in a formal “Family Plan.”

BMAC’s employment services include transitional jobs (TJ) and OJT, distinct strategies that both aim to help BMAC’s participants succeed in the workforce. BMAC also helps consumers connect with the local community college, where they can gain additional skills and credentials to help them advance in the labor market and earn family-sustaining wages.

BMAC integrates its employment programming with comprehensive supportive services to ensure the success of the Family Plan. These services include coordinating affordable child care, addressing mental health or substance-abuse issues, offering help in obtaining a driver’s license, and providing financial education and asset-building opportunities.

To learn more, please visit <http://www.bmacww.org>

### » St. Patrick Center, St. Louis, Missouri

St. Patrick Center is one of Missouri’s largest providers of housing, employment opportunities, and access to health care, serving more than 8,000 individuals and families per year who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The agency’s employment programs provide clients with GED courses, occupation-skills training, OJT, and job placement in many different settings. Clients can be exposed to several industries, including green/horticulture/recycling companies, restaurants and food-service providers, and other job-training programs, many of which include paid wages. St. Patrick Center also integrates housing and behavioral health programs as needed. Services provided to clients may include permanent supportive housing, transportation, work uniforms, rental assistance, life-skills training, mental health treatment, financial guidance, nutrition assistance, and child care.

To learn more, please visit [www.stpatrickcenter.org](http://www.stpatrickcenter.org)



programming. Connecting with a similar organization that has successfully implemented employment programming for people experiencing homelessness can help a new program avoid pitfalls and identify effective practices. If an organization is interested in forming a peer learning relationship with an established program, the NTJN may be able to connect that group with a peer.

Jennifer and Rob, a young couple with a toddler, struggled to make ends meet. Without high school diplomas or work experience, they had great difficulty in finding employment to secure housing. Since their sole income was the \$385 per month they received through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), it's no surprise that the young family became homeless. Jennifer, Rob, and their toddler doubled up with Jennifer's family, but having eight people in the house was not sustainable. That's when Rob was arrested—and when the family was connected with BMAC.

BMAC offers a range of services to families experiencing or at risk of homelessness, including access to transitional housing and robust employment programming to set families on the path to self-sufficiency. BMAC quickly placed the family in housing and then helped mitigate the barriers to employment that had left the parents unable to afford a home.

BMAC connected Jennifer and Rob to the local community college, where they earned their GEDs. Rob's court fees were settled, and BMAC placed him in its wage-paid, on-the-job training (OJT) program, which matches low-skilled workers with employers who are partially reimbursed for providing job-specific training to prepare an individual for work with that or a similar employer.

With Rob on the path to employment, BMAC provided the financial support Jennifer needed to train as a certified nursing assistant (CNA). Jennifer successfully completed CNA training but still had a significant barrier to employment—her limited work history. BMAC again leveraged its OJT program, helping Jennifer secure a job with an employer who was willing to provide her with hands-on CNA experience in exchange for partial reimbursement of these job-training costs. Jennifer still works for this employer, who hired her for an unsubsidized job in June 2013.

Today, the family has its own home. Though Rob lost his job when the business that had employed him closed, he hopes to enter culinary school to gain further skills and find a job that will fulfill his passion for cooking. With Jennifer's income, the family is able to maintain housing and continues to take steps toward financial stability.

## Recommendations for Delivering Employment Services for Families Experiencing Homelessness

Families experiencing homelessness will bring certain strengths, barriers, and needs to the process of finding, succeeding in, and advancing in employment. Homeless-service providers should recognize that heads of households usually require tailored strategies for leveraging those strengths.



A St. Patrick Center BEST participant takes a break from his job.

Dependable, affordable **child care** is absolutely essential for parents of young children to be successfully employed. Parents experiencing homelessness may have weak social networks or may have exhausted those networks. This can make it more difficult to secure backup child care with family or friends, which places even greater importance on connecting these families with available child care subsidies and affordable center-based child care. Providing on-site child care for parents still engaged in employment programming may also make it easier for these parents to take full advantage of available services. “St. Patrick Center has a drop-in center for children whose parents are here for programming,” says Jess Cox, St.

Patrick Center’s employment services manager. “Kids can be in a safe, fun environment while their parents are going to classes or meeting with case managers.”

Some employment programs serving families experiencing homelessness also **teach household management skills** to help parents balance work and home life, prepare quick, healthy meals, and maintain household budgets. “We have a living skills program that includes budgeting, landlord-tenant rights, preparing meals, and nutrition education,” Yohe explains. “There’s also a GED component for individuals who have not completed high school.”

To ensure that families become and remain stably housed, employment programs should take on the challenging task of helping parents find jobs with **family-sustaining pay and benefits**. Unfortunately, not all employment opportunities will allow individuals or families to escape homelessness and poverty. As Yohe puts it, “A job ‘doing anything’ is not necessarily the right answer.” In fact, many people experiencing homelessness already work, and recent Census data shows that over 30 percent of poor children are in families with at least one member working full-time—as are over 50 percent of children in low-income households, or those earning less than twice the federal poverty level income (\$19,790 for a family of three in 2014). In the current U.S. labor market, many of the positions available to people experiencing homelessness are low-wage and/or part-time and fail to pay family-sustaining wages, offer access to health insurance, or present opportunities for advancement. “A lot of

## » **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

- » To learn more about Community Voice Mail, visit <http://bit.ly/1nAo5eo>.
- » For more information on the program models used to help people experiencing homelessness succeed in employment, please see the NTJN’s Working to End Homelessness paper, “Employment Program Models for People Experiencing Homelessness,” at <http://bit.ly/1hfhQbC>.
- » To ask the NTJN for assistance, visit <http://bit.ly/OYWPHy>.
- » For more information on asset-building strategies for low-income populations, see the NTJN and the National Health Care for the Homeless Council’s paper, “Work Matters: Employment as a Tool for Preventing Homelessness and Improving Health,” at <http://bit.ly/1eQA0Q6>.
- » On its Web site, <http://www.heartlandalliance.org/ntjn/>, the NTJN offers program models used to help people experiencing homelessness succeed in employment.

St. Patrick Center’s clients are used to working for a temp service or in an under-the-table job,” says Cox. “We definitely encourage them to look for employment at a higher level, something that does have benefits and good pay. We want to help them to see that they should be investing in themselves, because the temp and under-the-table-jobs haven’t been working.”

Programs have different strategies to help individuals find and advance in quality, family-sustaining jobs. “We make sure that the job leads we’re giving our clients are with good employers, not employers who will take advantage of them,” says Cox. This means targeting industries known for promotions, raises, and benefits and building relationships with high-quality employers. Focusing on high-growth sectors is also important. “Typically, we try to place people into positions that are in demand in our local area,” says Goodwin of BMAC. “A lot of these jobs are in the medical field.” Increasing clients’ skills is especially important, as industry- or job-specific training that leads to industry-recognized certificates has been shown to help low-income workers increase earnings and access benefits. “We work with Walla Walla’s community college, which offers our clients education and skill enhancement,” Goodwin explains. “We can assist our clients in getting a certified nursing assistant license or with courses that will prepare them to be an administrative assistant or medical receptionist.” Referring to the OJT programming BMAC provided to Rob and Jennifer, Goodwin adds, “We also have some job training programs for people who are under-skilled—we can reimburse companies up to half of participants’ wages to enhance their skills.”

It is also critical to offer employment services using a **strengths-based** approach. “Heads of households tend to have a stronger work history [than single adults experiencing homelessness] and tend to be motivated about finding employment because it’s not just themselves they have to be concerned about, it’s their children,” Yohe says. Indeed, because many families experience homelessness for primarily economic reasons, parents or heads of households are likely to have recent employment experience, transferrable occupational skills, and professional networks that programs can leverage to help them get work. Two-parent families also have a potential advantage in that one parent may be able to pursue further occupational-skills training while the other works, or one may provide child care while the other is at his or her job. Parents may also be able to arrange their work schedules so that while one parent is at work the other is at home, and vice versa. As Cox says, “If you’re a family unit, you’ve got someone backing you up.”

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***It is important to help parents find jobs with family-sustaining pay and benefits. Not all employment opportunities will allow individuals or families to escape homelessness and poverty. As Nancy Yohe of St. Patrick Center puts it, “A job ‘doing anything’ is not necessarily the right answer.”***

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Families with children are more likely to be eligible for **public benefits** such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly Food Stamps) or TANF, which can help stabilize families financially while parents pursue training and employment. Low-income workers with dependent children are also eligible for the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), one of the largest and most effective national antipoverty initiatives. Some states also offer an EITC to workers.

Finally, while employment is a critical initial component of helping families transition out of homelessness, **asset building** establishes a “personal safety net” so that a family remains stably housed even in the face of future unanticipated expenses or job loss. Providers can incorporate asset-building strategies into their employment programming. “We absolutely do asset building at BMAC,” says Goodwin. “We offer MoneySmart classes, and our participants can come in to make one-on-one appointments to learn financial management skills.” Financial education can help connect heads of households to safe and affordable financial products such as low- or no-cost checking accounts; educate them about predatory lending and credit card costs; and teach practical skills, such as budgeting and balancing a checkbook. Homeless-service providers can also help customers claim tax credits such as the EITC and the Child Tax Credit (CTC) by connecting heads of households to Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) sites, where qualified low-income individuals can receive free tax preparation and filing. For organizations with the resources to offer robust asset-building programming, developing a match-savings program encourages saving and increases assets to help families meet realistic financial goals—such as paying a first month’s rent or reducing debt—and lay the foundation for long-term stability.

## Conclusion

In our nation’s efforts to end homelessness, we need to use all of the tools and strategies at our disposal. Earned income through employment is one important part of long-term solutions to ending homelessness, and any efforts to help families exit homelessness should include employment services. As Goodwin notes, “I see a lot of heads of households come in to BMAC saying that they really want a job, they want to increase their income and be able to take care of their families and get off of state assistance. They’re motivated, they know they can do it, they just need a chance.” ■

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