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Supported Employment for the Ex-Mentally Ill

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Employment of People with Disabilities

Supported Employment for the Ex-Mentally Ill

Deborah Wan

General Secretary

New Life Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association

Background

The importance of productive work as a component of healthy human existence has been generally recognised. Most people spend two-thirds to three-quarters of our working weekdays at work. Besides the obvious economic support and security that people derive from their work, majority of us can enjoy additional rewards from social relationships, meaningful productivity, and the opportunity for self-fulfilment. The inability to work causes the loss of these concrete and effective benefits. It also results in devastating insult to self-esteem, for work is a principal criterion of normality for many people in our society.

Persons with prolonged and severe mental illness face a lot of obstacles in the quest for gainful employment. Foremost is the destruction of affective, cognitive, social, and basic task functions, which results directly from the illness. However, the positive symptoms characteristic of psychotic disorders, although incompatible with gainful employment, do not preclude successful work adjustment when in remission. In most cases, these symptoms can be treated adequately with medication, and many clients learn to function successfully with residual positive symptoms through psycho-education and work-adjustment training.

From our experiences in working with mentally ill people for over three decades, we find that the most important thing professionals can do for the ex-mentally ill is to help them attain gainful employment. Employment is not only a necessary condition for true independent community living with freedom of choice but is the springboard from which persons with chronic mental illness can attain those rewarding aspects of living that so many of us take for granted: social relationships, family life, entertainment, cultural pursuits and travel.

Yet historically, vocational rehabilitation has almost been a missing element in the psychiatric rehabilitation system. Full-time, competitive & stable employment for our clients is the rare exception. A very low percentage of our clients can find open employment. Many of them fail because they are totally unsupported in the open competitive working environment which they are most vulnerable to frustrations met with their limited coping ability. Yet, the picture would be quite different if an on-going support and rapport are provided for our clients in their employment.

Need for Supported Employment

Supported Employment refers to providing services to maintain severely disabled individuals in competitive employment. In supported employment, only job development and site preparation are done before an individual is placed on the job. Most services are provided after placement for specific skill training or work adjustment on the job site by a "job coach", who may also provide travel training and job analysis. The transfer of learning required in the traditional "train and place" approach is eliminated. This removes a major impediment for psychiatrically disabled persons, who often have difficulty transferring skills from one situation (training) to another (work). Although the "job coach" may initially perform a significant portion of the individual's work in order to role model and to satisfy the employer's production requirements, gradually the "coach" fades as the worker adjusts to the job. Ideally, supportive services remain available continuously and are resumed as needed in order to maintain the work permanently on the job. Permanent employment is the goal.

We have piloted a supported employment service since November 1993 with funding support from the Community Chest, and our pilot schemes on transitional employment and simulated business received favourable response and proved to be a success in the year 1994. This gave us the confidence to show to the Government that supported employment service for ex-mentally ill persons really worked very well, and eventually the government gave green light for subventing supported employment service for disabled persons since March 1995.

We therefore define the mission, the target group, functional services and service projects as follows:

Mission

To explore and develop employment opportunities for recovered mental patients;

To enhance recovered mental patients to participate in productive and gainful employment through on-going support services.

Target Group

Recovered mental patients and those coupled with mental handicap who possess abilities and capabilities for employment.

Functional Services

A team of professionals comprising of social workers, occupational therapists and marketing executives are engaged to provide the following three specialized services:

1. Recruitment and Training Service

- Conduct vocational assessment and screening;
- Provide pre-employment job-related skills training;
- Design different training packages to suit different employment needs of clients;
- Render tailor-made training to employees.

2. Marketing and Job Development Service

- Contact employers to explore and identify job posts for recovered mental patients;
- Promote "Trial Employment" with flexible accommodations;
- Provide consultation and support to prospective employers;
- Organize talks and seminars on mental health to employers.

3. Social Work Service

- Provide person-centered counselling services to prospective employees;
- Liaise with family members to solicit their support to recovered mental patients in seeking employment;
- Render on-going support to clients to sustain gainful employment.
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Service Projects

1. Transitional employment

- Proactive approach to identify different job posts;
- Offer pre-employment and on-the-job training;
- Provide on-going support to employees to sustain gainful employment;
- Render consultation and support to prospective employers.

2. Simulated Business

- An innovative attempt to provide training and employment for recovered mental patients in business setting;
- Our vegetable market stall in Kin Sang Estate, Tuen Mun has proved to be a viable and effective employment option to re-integrate them into the community;
- Attempts will be made to identify and develop other types of simulated business as to broaden their employment opportunities.

3. Supported Cleaning Team

- A pioneer project to suit the employment needs of recovered mental patients coupled with mental handicap;
- It is a mobile crew rendering car-cleaning and office-cleaning services, with supervision from a job coach;

- Specific training on cleaning services is offered for all team members prior to their job assignment;
- On-the-Job car-cleaning service has started in Tuen Mun area; and office-cleaning service will be offered too.

Conclusion

Supported employment service is serving two distinct targets a) those who have previously failed repeatedly in open employment, b) those who can move upward from sheltered employment. For the past two solid years' experiences, we have proved that supporting ex-mentally ill in open employment is essential and meaningful.

I am happy to share with you our Hong Kong experience in this perspective with the Japanese counterparts.