

# ***A Supported Employment Story***

Lessons Learned from the Vermont Mental Health Transformation  
Demonstration Sites

Presented by

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# Presenter Bio

My name is Will Eberle, I'm a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and trauma who dropped out of high school and spent most of my youth and early adult years homeless, unemployed, and struggling with mental health crisis and substance abuse.

Today I run a Community Center in Montpelier Vermont called Another Way, which provides peer support, supported employment, and recovery services over 7,600 times to over 300 unique individuals per year. I've earned a college degree, I own a house, my wife and I have two healthy children, and we'll celebrate our 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary at the end of the month. Mental Health challenges and substance abuse are no longer a part of my life. Employment has been the bedrock of my recovery.

I'm here today to share both my personal and professional experience to help you provide supported employment services which are compassionate enough, and excellent enough, to truly transform people's lives.

# Success Stories to Start us Off!



These are all peers at *Another Way* who have gained employment through our SEP IPS program. It really works!

# “IPS Squared”

- VT MHTG sites used the SEP IPS model, and provided Intentional Peer Support training.
- This gave employment staff skills to deal with mental health/addiction/trauma issues that came up.
- The Vocational specialist did some peer support, but did a smooth handoff to other peer support staff for specific, non employment-related issues.

# Strengths of Peers in SEP IPS Roles

- Training in IPS/WRAP, cultural sensitivity etc, allowed SEP staff to make strong connections where other vocational programs didn't.
- Lived experience with homelessness, addiction, mental health issues, trauma, incarceration, unemployment etc gave specific insight, built rapport.
- Wider employment community respected we had something new to offer, and was eager to collaborate in innovative ways.
- SEP IPS programs were embedded in larger peer organizations that had comprehensive services to help with other areas of need, through a peer lens that often worked better than other service models.

# Challenges Faced in Peer roles

- We had small programs with only one FTE each, no “employment team.”
- Geographic distance between our programs.
- Transportation, job shortage obstacles faced by job seekers in rural environment.
- Host peer organizations didn’t have wrap around services available – often had to refer to other organizations who don’t use a peer approach, people we worked with didn’t always get the same strengths based, non-judgmental message everywhere they went.
- VT housing shortage, difficulty with shelter not embracing IPS model.
- Temptation for employment staff to double as Peer Support staff, the need to focus on employment.

# Stats from the VT MHTG Sites

Vermont has two SEP IPS Sites:

The Wellness Coop in Burlington, Vermont and Another Way in Montpelier, Vermont

In our first year of the project, we worked with a combined 51 unique individuals, of whom 20 worked during some part of the year, for an annual employment rate of 39%

In our second year, we worked with a combined 72 unique individuals, of whom 39 worked during some part of the year, for an annual employment rate of 54%.

We don't have year end data for our current, third year of the project, but preliminary data indicates additional increases across the board.

Designated Agencies running Supported Employment programs in our region average a 40% annual employment rate.

# My Employment Story

I've been a builder for many years, prior to working in the mental health field. When I was grappling with addiction, and my first marriage was ending, when I was having mental health crisis, I always looked at the jobsite as my salvation. No matter how bad things were at home I knew that when I got to work I'd have to focus so hard on the job at hand that I wouldn't be able to think about all my personal issues too, and I'd get an "8 hour vacation from my problems." It was almost like meditation, framing walls, and laying shingles until my mind was empty.

I got immediate satisfaction from contributing in a tangible way, to making things other people needed and appreciated. Even at my worst, I never felt completely worthless, because I knew I could make enduring, beautiful things that other people needed.

Eventually I lost my house and my marriage. But I still felt valuable when I was working. I lived in tents in national forests and walked for miles, to paint houses. Then, when I could afford it, I bought a truck and lived in the back with my tools when I wasn't building houses. As I got more supportive people in my life and it became more clear to me that I added value to other people's lives by making them beautiful things they needed, I came to believe that I too had value. I faced my demons and stayed in one place, started addressing my trauma and mental health issues, went to college at night. Finally I met a wonderfully supportive new person, and dared to get married again. I eventually found a way to use my working life to build up my own life too.

Today the work I do helps people who faced what I did, helps people not be homeless, overcome addiction, come to terms with their trauma and mental health issues, helps people get jobs that make them feel important, and needed, and valuable.

I'll always remember what it felt like to hold a cardboard sign begging for enough money to eat, and what it feels like to send my mortgage payment off to the bank today. No matter what I've been through, work has gotten me through it. Never underestimate what a job can do for a person.