

IPS Supported Employment in Rural and Frontier Areas

To develop this document, IPS trainers from multiple states shared potential advantages for rural IPS programs, challenges faced in frontier and rural areas, and examples of how problems have been resolved.

Potential Advantages for IPS Programs in Rural Areas

- Employment outcomes were not significantly different between urban and rural U.S. programs in the IPS Learning Community (Haslett, Drake, Bond, Becker, & McHugo, 2011). IPS programs in small communities were also able to achieve high IPS supported employment fidelity scores rates comparable to programs in large communities (Luciano, Drake, Bond, & Becker, 2014).
- The way that programs respond to challenges may overcome issues related to service provision in rural or frontier areas. A strong commitment to the IPS approach, and responding to barriers with creativity and energy can make a difference.
- Small mental health centers sometimes have better integration of employment and mental health services because staff at the agency all know one another.
- Small agencies often have less hierarchy so upper management is likely to understand how the IPS program works and has more contact with IPS staff. In some cases, the agency executive director attends some team meetings.
- Many employment specialists in rural areas have prior relationships with employers. Connections through family members and friends are also prevalent and enhance job development.
- It is sometimes easier for small agencies to make organizational changes while implementing IPS.
- Relationships with Vocational Rehabilitation¹ counselors may be stronger in rural areas because there are fewer counselors to know.

Challenges and Opportunities

Rural and frontier communities often have limited public transportation or a lack of public transportation. Examples of how some IPS staff increased transportation options:

- Agency staff advocated with the local bus company for extended service. Bus company managers agreed to longer schedules and service on Saturdays.
- Vocational Rehabilitation counselors have sometimes helped with taxi and other transportation costs, usually on a short-term basis.
- Agency staff partnered with an organization that provides senior services. The senior center staff agreed that their transportation service would pick up workers who lived on the senior transportation routes.

¹ Vocational Rehabilitation is an agency in the US that helps people with disabilities gain, maintain or advance in employment.

- An agency subcontracted with Head Start² to use their busses and drivers during the time that the children were at the Head Start program.
- Employment specialists knew of a particular employer who could not hire enough workers who could get to the business. A group of employment specialists approached the employer to suggest that the business develop its own transportation service that would help many of the employees, including those from IPS programs. The employer agreed and purchased buses. The system is a bit challenging for part-time workers, but helpful to many people.
- United Way³ has helped with transportation funding in some areas.
- Working people have posted notices in workplace break rooms offering for gas money in exchange for rides to work.
- Independent Living Centers⁴ have helped coordinate transportation for people in some states. Those organizations have also been a resource for employment specialists to learn about other services in the area.

There are fewer businesses in rural areas. Strategies that employment specialists have used to maximize the opportunities that are available include:

- Exploring seasonal work with farmers.
- Learning about veterinary services that are unique to rural areas.
- Helping job seekers investigate options to commute by train to jobs in urban areas.
- Staying in touch with local employers and local leaders because many job openings are not advertised—word of mouth is used more than in urban areas. Employment specialists network, read local newspapers to learn about changes in the business community, join Chambers of Commerce, participate in local service organizations, ask for tours of businesses, and visit with people in informal settings.
- Visiting every business in the area, regardless of the size of the business.
- Learning about businesses that are not typical storefront businesses, for example, businesses that operate out of people’s homes.
- Developing trust with employers, and being accountable to employers, which may be more important than in urban areas. Employment specialists follow through with agreements and avoid overpromising what they can do.
- Job creating—working with an employer to develop a new position.
- Considering work-at-home positions for companies that are not local. An example is calling to schedule appointments for a doctor. (Some state Vocational Rehabilitation counselors can share lists of employers who provide credible work-from-home positions.)

² Head Start is a pre-school program for young children in the U.S.

³ United Way of America focuses on projects in education, income, and health. It provides funding for some non-profit organizations.

⁴ Independent Living Centers are “consumer-controlled, community-based, cross-disability, nonresidential, private, nonprofit agencies that are designed and operated within a local community by individuals with disabilities.”

- Using self-employment, for example, a man in the Smokey Mountains builds and sells furniture independently.
- Building relationships with staff at temporary agencies. Temporary positions are often links to permanent factory jobs.
- Interacting with employers in a professional manner, even when prior, personal relationships exist.

Negative perceptions about a job seeker or the IPS program can be difficult to change.

- If a job seeker has an unfavorable reputation in the area, she may have difficulty finding work. The key is to introduce the job seeker to employers so they can develop their own impressions of the person. Employment specialists ask employers to give the job seeker a tour of their businesses, mock interviews, or allow a job seeker to briefly shadow workers to learn about a specific position. When an employer has a preconceived idea about a job seeker, the employment specialist is patient and persistent—he continues to visit that employer. He shares what he knows about the person’s strengths.
- If an IPS program has a poor reputation with employers, staff must change perceptions about the program. Strategies include asking reporters to meet working people and include positive stories about IPS in the media, ensuring that the agency board of directors hears from working people and asking board members to be ambassadors to the employer community, and involving prominent employers on the IPS steering committee.

Lack of a vocational unit either because the IPS team only has one employment specialist or because specialists work in separate locations. Strategies to build a vocational unit include:

- Expand the program beyond one employment specialist position. As more people return to work, share that news with clients and celebrate with mental health practitioners to increase referrals to the program.
- If employment specialists work in geographically distant locations, meet by teleconference, Webinar, Skype, Google+, etc. three times each month. Meet in person once each month.
- Even when an IPS program covers several counties (employment specialists work from different locations), encourage employment specialists to help each other, for example, by taking a job seeker to a job interview.
- Ask mental health practitioners to provide backup for the employment specialists, especially when that does not include working with employers.
- Connect a single employment specialist to another employment team in the area. One example is of employment specialists at a peer-operated center who attend weekly meetings with an IPS team at the local mental health center. They share job leads and suggestions to help people served by both programs.
- Develop a regularly scheduled meeting for all local job developers, including those from other types of employment programs. This provides support for job development, though not necessarily for the IPS approach.

Turnover interrupts employment services if there is only one employment specialist. Ideas to improve continuity of services:

- Encourage management to create a second employment specialist position, even if it is part time.
- Ask the Vocational Rehabilitation counselor and mental health practitioners to provide services while the position is vacant.

Meeting productivity requirements can be difficult because extra driving time is necessary in rural and frontier areas. Examples of how some employment specialists and managers have dealt with this problem include:

- A program leader asked a church to provide office space to an employment specialist so she would not have to drive back to the agency between appointments. The specialist is able to complete paperwork, make phone calls, and meet clients at the church.
- Employment specialists schedule successive client appointments and employer contacts in one geographic area.
- Employment specialists track when job seekers are scheduled to come to the agency for mental health appointments. Employment specialists usually meet people in the community, but when they know their client is coming to the agency, they schedule job developing with the person since she will be in town that day.
- Agency managers adjust productivity expectations for employment specialists because they spend at least 65 percent of their work week in the community. Another reason for the adjustment is that meeting with employers may involve driving to businesses where the employer is not available, or only available for a few minutes.

References

Haslett, W.R., Drake, R.E., Bond, G.R., Becker, D.R., & McHugo, G.J. (2011). Individual Placement and Support: Does rurality matter? *American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation, 14*, 237-244.

Luciano, A., Bond, G.R., Drake, R.E., & Becker, D.R. (2013). Is High Fidelity to Supported Employment Equally Attainable in Small and Large Communities? *Community Mental Health Journal, 50*(1), 46-50.