Evidence - Based Practice Supported Employment

Highlight: Consumer Story from Sumner Mental Health Center
Supported Employment Services – Darrin’s Story

Sumner Mental Health Center has been implementing evidence-based practice supported employment services for the past two years. Susie Bishop, CSS Director is supervisor of supported employment and Sammie Brown is the supported employment specialist.

For this issue of the EBP Times, we would like to share a consumer story that highlights the work of the supported employment services at Sumner Mental Health Center and Darrin’s courageous and inspirational journey pursuing his goal to work. This story demonstrates many of the principles of supported employment evidence-based practice including consumer preference, individualized job search, engagement and outreach, and zero exclusion.

Darrin’s Story

Darrin first started having symptoms of psychosis when he was 23 years old; he was married with two children at that time. He had graduated from high school, completed vocational training in welding and one semester of college. He had work experience as a welder, blacksmith, brick restoration, and auto body repair.

As the symptoms of his illness became more severe he was unable to maintain employment and he and his wife divorced. Darrin also had severe substance abuse and dependence that started when he was a teenager, and had some drug related criminal charges.

Darrin first sought treatment when he was 27 years old. He had not been able to work for a few years and had been living with his siblings and parents. His mother had helped him to initiate an application for Social Security Disability. He was referred for CSS and he soon voiced a desire to work, and was referred to supported employment. Darrin was inconsistent in his engagement in treatment and continued with frequent alcohol and drug use. He dropped out of treatment within one year.
He presented at the mental health center again a few years later after hospitalization for severe psychotic symptoms. Again, Darrin struggled with managing the symptoms of his illness complicated by substance dependence, and dropped out of treatment after one year.

After another three years passed he was involuntarily admitted to the State Hospital, and the symptoms of his illness were the most severe he had ever experienced. Once stabilized, he returned to his community to live with his father. He became very isolative and had very little motivation to make steps in a recovery process. However, he did engage in mental health treatment more consistently and agreed to try to work again.

Initially, he was only interested in trying to market and sell his artwork, poems, children’s books, or to work in a music store as he was a self-taught guitar player. The employment specialist contacted galleries, music stores, etc. and assisted Darrin with exploring these possibilities. During this process Darrin became aware that he wanted to develop his skills as a salesman so he could better sell his works of art. He then started to focus his job search in sales positions, and even brought in the Red Book for salesmen to his SE appointment.

He wanted to pursue employment in a territory the ES had no familiarity with and he was not comfortable providing disclosure. They began by visiting stores where he felt he had an interest in their product but not much experience in. Each time they met to obtain applications and make contacts with the employers, Darrin began to take charge, speak for himself and have more confidence in how to approach employers.

After four months of job search, completing several applications, Darrin was granted his first job interview. Soon after came the second interview and then the third. Darrin was hired on at Sears as a part time sales associate. He is not only a good sales associate; he is a great sales associate. In November, 2007, Darrin was awarded the Power One award at Sears and during the month he was awarded this, he was also recognized nationally for receiving the best score out of all sales associates in the nation. At work, he is seen as the “go to guy” because of customer service skills. During his employment at Sears he worked with a few different supervisors. Two of those supervisors have moved on to other supervisory positions at other businesses and have tried to recruit Darrin to work for them. Darrin has now opened the doors to find employment elsewhere if he chooses to change jobs.

Darrin has described his benefits from work as a type of therapy for him. He is in a place where he is recognized for his talents at work, not for his mental illness. Darrin no longer lives with his father, he has not needed hospitalization for over 18 months, and he feels proud he can be an example of a working father for his children. When asked what he thought was most important to share with others about his story, he said “don’t let yourself be stuck with where you’ve been or what you’ve done; be willing to try new things.”

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