

HOW CAN WE DO MORE TO HELP MEMBERS MOVE INTO FULL-TIME INDEPENDENT EMPLOYMENT?

Clubhouses have long been committed to assisting members return to paid work. Our Transitional Employment Programs have helped countless numbers of members start the process of regaining the confidence, stamina, and interest in going back to real work – in real jobs for real wages, at real companies and businesses.

Over time, Clubhouses began to recognize that they had to develop means for members to move beyond TE, and into jobs that they can call their own and keep for as long as they wish. Clubhouses got to work trying to find part-time jobs that wouldn't interfere with members' crucial government benefits.

Now, we are at a new crossroads. With so many members having benefited from TE, and then from Clubhouse assistance with finding part-time jobs that could co-exist with ongoing benefits, Clubhouses around the world are now finding that many members are ready to take the next step. Clubhouses have proven that people with mental illness can indeed work – which was once a revolutionary idea. Now, Clubhouses are beginning to recognize that, for many, work does not have to remain a part-time addendum to a monthly benefits check.

It is time for Clubhouses to take a new look at ourselves, and once again ask ourselves the question that Clubhouses have always raised: How fully are we living up to our professed belief in the vast, untapped potential of each and every member?

The following is a list of suggestions for Clubhouses to further assist members to find, and keep, full-time employment:

- Clubhouses need to be more knowledgeable about the consequences of a member going off of benefits. In some states, people can still get medical benefits if they earn less than a certain income. In the United States even if a member has gone off benefits, if he or she is rehospitalized and unable to work, benefits can usually be restored. Clubhouse staff should be familiar with these realities in their own countries and regions.
- Clubhouses must make the long-term commitment to stand behind a member who is willing to take the risk of getting a full-time job. If a member knows that the Clubhouse is there, and will offer whatever support is necessary, he or she will be much more likely to be willing to take the risk of potentially losing benefits.
- Clubhouses can raise money to be able to maintain a discretionary fund to assist members as they move off of benefits and into full-time work. This could be used for temporary assistance with rent, work clothes, and other emergency assistance that might help the member make the transition into financial self-sufficiency.
- A well-developed Supported Employment program offers the best chance for individuals to develop the confidence and job skills necessary to secure and maintain full-time employment. Such programs should be structured to enable people to work on a variety of part-time jobs in different employment settings until full-time employment is achieved.

- One staff worker should take the lead in assisting members as they work toward transitioning into full-time employment from TE or SE part-time jobs.
- It is often helpful if members who are doing TE or SE are also taking one or more courses in an Adult Education program or a community college. This can help members begin to expand their perspectives, and their vision of the possibilities for future careers.
- The Clubhouse should work with the member to develop an identified support network to assist in this effort. Networks can include family, friends, other members, doctors, program staff and TE and SE employers. Such networks provide support; can open doors to potential employers; serve as references; provide counsel; and help in the preparation of resumes and practice in interviewing.
- A key concern is how past history should be handled in a job interview. Clubhouse employment programs must assist members to formulate their own personal approach to this critical matter, so that they are not taken off guard in an interview. The more the member has given thought to this matter, the more confident and comfortable s/he will appear in the interview.
- Some members may benefit from having the Clubhouse be more directly involved in job development activities. This would involve having the Clubhouse actively seek job openings, and having Clubhouse representatives contact employers and make initial presentations on the qualifications of members for particular openings. Such advance presentations can be especially significant in helping members overcome obstacles arising from past history.
- In the United States, an employment program offering TE and SE opportunities should become an employment network under the Ticket to Work program of the Social Security Administration. The program can be helpful in protecting members who go to work full-time, and at the same time can generate some income for the Clubhouse's employment program.
- The employment program should be a strong advocate for members in respect to medical and other benefit programs, and work to assist members to move through these complex obstacles. Specific dates should be carefully recorded, including the date the government benefits stopped, the date of the first paycheck, and the onset of employer paid medical insurance. It is important to keep a paper trail, including copies of pay stubs, and letters to government agencies informing them of this change. Both the member and Clubhouse should keep a copy of such documentation, if the member feels this would be helpful. Government agencies can make mistakes in determining stop dates and if this occurs, the documentation kept by the member and/or Clubhouse can help significantly.
- Many members who live in subsidized housing may also have a change in their rent when they begin independent employment, as rent is often predicated on a percentage of their income. Again, it is important to do this homework ahead of time so that the member is well informed of potential changes and has adequate means to pay the rent if income significantly changes.
- The program and the member need to develop strategies to deal with any stigma in the work place as well as stigma internalized by the member.

- The generalist staffing pattern in the Clubhouse provides an excellent support base for independently employed members. Although working, these members can retain important relationships with familiar Clubhouse staff, rather than being passed onto vocational specialists. It is common for many independently employed members to want periodic telephone contact, which provides an opportunity to simply connect again with the Clubhouse or work through day-to-day issues. Clubhouses encourage social integration; however, they also recognize the importance of the meaningful relationships that helped the member to gain the confidence to seek out independent employment in the first place.
- The Clubhouse should have regularly scheduled dinners, meetings, and other events that are scheduled at times when members working full time can access them.