



Community Engagement Program: Linking Customized Employment with Supportive Housing

The Community Engagement Program in Portland, Oregon is serving the long-term homeless population by pairing permanent housing with customized employment services for up to 89 individuals. The team stresses the benefits of employment to each individual's rehabilitation and recovery process. It is expected that the philosophy that employment promotes recovery will have a powerful influence on tenant self-expectations.

In addition to this profile, please see the [sample documents](#) from the Community Engagement Program and a [photo tour](#) of the services and some of the scattered site buildings housing tenants.

Origin, Background, and Goals

Designed in response to the Department of Housing and Urban Development and Department of Labor Notice of Funding Availability titled "Ending Chronic Homelessness Through Employment and Housing," CEP-IV is a new team within the Community Engagement Program (CEP), a program of Central City Concern. Awarded in October 2003, CEP-IV represents a partnership between Central City Concern (a twenty-five year old comprehensive homeless service organization), Worksystems, Inc. (a nonprofit career placement and training organization), and the Housing Authority of Portland ([see project organizational chart](#)). The project is anticipated to be funded for five years, with funds diminishing beginning in year three. The Community Engagement Program includes several Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) teams¹ focusing on serving homeless individuals with substance use issues, mental illness, and other severe disabilities.

The target population for CEP-IV is individual adults in Multnomah County, Oregon (which includes Portland) who have been homeless for at least one year or who have had four or more episodes of homelessness over the last three years, experience a severe disability, and who express an interest in employment. Working with this population, the program has three main goals:

- Placement of up to 89 chronic homeless individuals into self-selected employment that provides earnings, benefits, and career advancement.
- Movement of the same individuals into permanent housing under a tenant-based Shelter Plus Care subsidy.
- Developing systems change strategies that bring the workforce development system and organizations serving homeless populations into closer alignment.

Program Structure

The CEP-IV program includes the following components:

1. Outreach and engagement;
2. Wrap-around services provided by multidisciplinary service teams modeled after the Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) teams;
3. Shelter Plus Care tenant-based housing subsidies; and
4. Customized employment services provided in conjunction with the One Stop Career Center.²

Outreach and Engagement

CEP-IV focuses on engaging people who are in shelters, jails, and on the streets for the longest periods. To do this effectively, the team partners with providers of shelters, jails, and street outreach programs to identify frequent users of these programs who are unable to stabilize in mainstream housing and services.

Outreach is just one step in identifying clients for this program. To be successful, the CEP-VI staff must engage people who likely are the most difficult to engage in services and housing supports, but who are also motivated towards employment. Some tools the team uses to promote successful engagement to build trusting relationships include motivational interviewing³ in addition to access to food and clothing, housing, and medical treatment. As soon as possible following referral, a case manager or mentor begins the process of engaging with the client and explaining the kinds of supports that may be available to assist them to move into permanent housing and employment. For individuals who are disenfranchised from the homeless services system, this process may be very gradual. Throughout outreach and engagement, staff attempt to “get to know” rather than “evaluate” individuals. Trust-building in this phase is critical. Creating a person-centered and strength-based assessment is an initial step toward instilling an atmosphere of hope and recovery with people who have usually defined their lives through their failures.

Wrap-around Services

CEP-IV is responsible for providing a full array of services to assist tenants, including: housing assistance, mental health services, substance use treatment and referrals, medication management, physical health treatment, around-the-clock crisis management, and assistance in accessing and managing entitlements and benefits. As in the ACT model, most services (a target of 75%) will be delivered in natural community settings, such as at the consumer’s residence, in their neighborhoods, or at their place of employment, rather than in a central office.

Caseloads are kept at a 1:10 ratio (one FTE per 10 tenants) and all members of the CEP team share responsibility for the entire caseload. Team members include:

- CEP Team Leader
- Customized Employment Specialist
- Housing Specialist
- Mental Health Specialists (2 FTE from community partner, Cascadia, a local community mental health program)
- Young Adult Specialist (from community partner Outside In, a local organization focused on assisting homeless youth)
- HIV/AIDS Specialist (from community partner Cascade AIDS Project, a local nonprofit provider of HIV/AIDS services, housing, education, advocacy)
- Peer Mentor

An assertive outreach effort is used to keep consumers engaged in services. CEP staff often likes to say, “We make it hard to stay sick and easier to get better.” The staff continually demonstrates that they do not give up on people and truly believe in the possibility of recovery. Staff sticks with people through relapse and recovery and continues to engage people whether housed or homeless.

CEP uses a strengths-based assessment and treatment plan and motivational interviewing to engage individuals in self-determined service planning. Staff receive on-going training in person-centered planning in order to create more comprehensive and integrated approaches to both housing and employment. For example, employment staff assist tenants in creating an employment plan which highlights their gifts, strengths, and capacities, and clearly defines the supports and accommodations necessary for them to attain their employment goals. The tenant and staff also create a “braided” resource plan, in which resources from many different systems are identified and accessed for their ability to help an individual reach his or her employment goal. The employment staff then uses these two plans as tools to identify employers and employment opportunities.

The team offers special expertise on serving homeless youth through the young adult specialist. Homeless young adults age 18-23 are often underserved because they are ineligible for children’s services and may not accept the criteria for services within the adult system. In addition, the adult service system may not adequately address the developmental needs of homeless young adults. Through partnership with youth agencies, the team is developing a more complete understanding of the culture of homeless youth and how to effectively engage and maintain them in services.

Similarly, CEP partners with a local agency to provide expertise on serving those living with HIV/AIDS. Persons living with HIV/AIDS are greatly over-represented among the long-term homeless population. The HIV Specialist helps serve this population directly and will help tenants access those HIV/AIDS-specific services necessary for a stable tenancy.

CEP helps tenants address their health concerns via referral to Central City Concern Health and Recovery Services, a Federally Qualified Health Center.⁴ A family nurse practitioner, a psychiatric nurse practitioner, a medical assistant, and an acupuncturist work with CEP consumers to assess and treat a myriad of medical disorders that have often gone untreated. Groups that focus on preventative medicine also offer services to CEP clients. These services are provided to clients regardless of their insurance status.

All services strive to meet tenants at whatever stage of treatment readiness they are at. While tenants are asked to commit to actively working with the CEP team, they are not required to be abstinent from alcohol or other drugs. Housing placements are made in both Alcohol and Drug Free Community settings and in settings that do not require abstinence. In working with people who continue to use alcohol or drugs, an emphasis is placed on harm reduction and encouraging them to adopt lifestyle changes that will not jeopardize their housing.

Shelter Plus Care Housing Subsidies

The Housing Authority of Portland (HAP) provides 89 Shelter plus Care housing subsidies to approved program participants. The CEP-IV Housing Specialist helps program participants locate private market or community units in which to use these subsidies. The original funding proposal identified a combination of SROs, studios, and one- and two-bedroom apartments that are located close to services and employment opportunities.

All housing must be located within a 10-mile radius of downtown Portland. The program makes every attempt to find housing that meets the individual’s needs, while keeping them actively

connected to supportive services. As of September 2004, the first 23 placements are across 15 different sites, without any direct intention of clustering units. One of these units is in a building owned by Central City Concern, 15 units are in buildings owned by nonprofit housing developers, and 7 units are in the private market. Tenants have individual leases with landlords. An [addendum to the lease](#) outlines additional expectations of the tenant related to involvement with the CEP-IV program.

The Housing Specialist on the CEP team makes every attempt to communicate in a timely and consistent basis with landlords. The program has been able to demonstrate the ability to respond quickly to problem situations due to its intensive staffing level. This has met with tremendous reception from landlords, many of whom have had poor experiences with programs that have not had the capacity to be as responsive. CEP is assisted in this work by Fresh Start, a program of the City of Portland Bureau of Housing and Community Development. Fresh Start mitigates landlord risks related to housing harder to house populations through committed supportive services and a landlord guarantee fund. As a Fresh Start-certified agency, CEP has access to a fund which reimburses up to \$2,000 for one-bedroom and smaller units and up to \$3,000 for two-bedroom and larger units for the following expenses:

- Damages caused by tenant in excess of normal wear and tear which exceeds the security deposit;
- One and one-half months of nonpayment of rent if tenant does not vacate apartment in good standing;
- Court costs and attorney fees where necessary to terminate a tenancy and remove a participant for nonpayment of rent or for other serious and repeated violations of the lease or state law. Landlords seeking reimbursement under this provision must provide evidence that they took reasonable steps to avoid eviction and that an eviction proceeding was necessary to avoid greater financial hardship to the landlord.

LGF coverage is valid for one year after initial move-in. For more information, see the [Fresh Start MOA](#).

As the remaining Shelter plus Care vouchers are utilized, there may be increased use of particular sites. Reasons for this include a desire to build supportive peer relationships and avoid isolation, the limited number of landlords willing to take hard-to-place individuals, and the inability to sustain intensive supportive services to a widely dispersed tenant population. These practical realities must be balanced against the commitment to honor client involvement and choice.

The awarding of the Shelter plus Care vouchers requires close collaboration with the Housing Authority and involves the following process: ([see flow chart](#))

- 1) CEP identifies those homeless individuals who qualify for permanent supportive housing and employment support based on project criteria (see “Outreach” above).
- 2) The Housing Specialist begins working with the applicant to determine their housing needs, preferences, and any special circumstances necessary to support them in their transition.
- 3) When a suitable location has been identified, the CEP Housing Specialist submits an application packet to HAP’s Rent Assistance Program coordinator. The CEP staff will also provide information on the unit the person will be leasing.

- 4) HAP's Rent Assistance Program coordinator reviews the packet for completeness and program eligibility, and then meets with applicant to review program rules and procedures.
- 5) HAP Section 8 staff completes a unit inspection.
- 6) Landlord and HAP enter into a payments contract, after which time regular monthly payments to the landlord begin.
- 7) CEP-IV continues to provide intensive case management services and collects information for regular HUD reports.

The wait for enrollment and authorization into Shelter plus Care can range from 48 hours to 1 week, depending on the ability to gather information and complete the eleven required forms. Once enrolled, it can take from 1-4 weeks to get into permanent housing. Placements that take place very quickly are sometimes overly stressful to people who have lived on the streets for long periods of time. The transition into permanent housing is made with maximum support built in for the tenant. CEP-IV clients may also be housed on an interim basis in SRO units operated by Central City Concern.

For those in early recovery, many request the additional support and security of Alcohol and Drug Free Community housing. People choosing this option may remain in this treatment-related housing for up to six months without jeopardizing their eligibility for permanent housing (which requires chronic homelessness).

Customized Employment Services

In CEP-IV, employment constitutes both the crucial component of treatment and the goal. The rehabilitative focus of the employment services is on work as therapy, providing a sense of purpose and meaning to life, as well as an economic reward. Work is held to offer tenants opportunities to develop individual skills, foster personal relationships, and—to many people—signify a normal life.

Two research-supported approaches are being used to shape the development of employment services provided by CEP-IV: Customized Employment and Individual Placement and Support:

- Customized Employment refers to the individualizing of the employment relationship between employees and employers in ways that meet the needs of both. It is based on an individualized determination of the strengths, needs, and interests of the person with a disability and is also designed to meet the specific needs of the employer. Customized employment is the preferred approach in Department of Labor-funded programs and encompasses several different strategies designed to work with people experiencing various disabilities. It may include employment developed through job carving, self-employment or entrepreneurial initiatives, or other job development or restructuring strategies that result in job responsibilities that are individually customized and negotiated.
- Individual Placement and Support is an evidence-based model of supported employment developed for persons with severe mental illness. This approach is person-centered and utilizes rapid placement in community-based competitive employment to achieve improved social and vocational functioning, reduction of primary symptoms of mental illness, reduction of the severity and occurrence of relapses, and increased satisfaction with life.

The CEP-IV Employment Specialist (ES) is the lead staff person working with tenants on employment issues, assisting them throughout the employment process, including engagement, assessment, job search, job placement, and job training. Though the ES is part of CEP-IV and is involved with decision-making on treatment needs, the ES does not engage in case management activities. Prior experience has shown that if the ES is also responsible for case management, including the management of crisis situations, then the team loses the vocational focus. However, the ES will work collaboratively with the case management team while participating in treatment decisions.

Upon each tenant's entry to the CEP program, the ES completes a job development plan with the client using a person-centered, strengths-assessment approach that helps the tenant identify personal goals and strengths. The ES also creates a team of supportive individuals of the tenant's choice to share in whatever is needed to return to work. Beginning with identification of the tenant's interests, aspirations, and priorities, the ES and tenant, with the team, build a plan in which the tenant's strengths and resources are affirmed and connected to the sequence of steps that will lead to the consumer's selected employment options. The critical components of this plan are that it is:

- thorough, detailed and specific;
- updated on a regular basis in order to maintain an ongoing process;
- drafted in a conversational manner using the tenant's language;
- tenant paced; and
- accountable to the CEP.

One of the project objectives is to initiate systems change within the DOL-funded One Stop Career Centers in order to more adequately address the needs of people who experience chronic homelessness. The West Portland One Stop is operated by Central City Concern and serves a large number of homeless individuals through an array of services funded through multiple partners. The target population for CEP-IV, however, represents individuals whose chronic addictions, mental illnesses, and physical impairments have still presented access barriers to a system not customized to their needs.

The program does not necessarily expect all tenants will eventually be living independently (without supportive services). The program does, however, believe that tenants will regain function in their lives with active support from people who are not paid caregivers. While most tenants will likely need long-term support services of some type, the intensity of these services is expected to decrease over time as tenants regain independence. Any tenant who has been able to assemble a network of natural supports may exit the program but will always be welcomed back as "alumni."

As of September 2004, seven CEP-IV tenants have secured employment ranging from temporary on-call assignments to full-time positions with benefits. Of these seven, three lost their jobs for various reasons, while four continue to remain employed. Two of these tenants are working for local non-profits in administrative and customer service capacities, one is working for a church doing maintenance and grounds work, and another is doing on-call janitorial work. Since rent is calculated at 30% of tenant income, job attainment or loss has corresponding impacts on tenant rents. Job attainment or loss does not, however, affect tenant's ability to remain in the program.

To date, two tenants have expressed interest in supported entrepreneurship opportunities. One tenant is interested in working part-time while staff assists him in developing a business plan. The other tenant is discussing the possibility of starting a business related to the film industry. He has a strong interest in directing and editing his own movies and staff has encouraged him to sign up for Portland Cable Access, which will give him access to necessary equipment.

CEP-IV staff note the following frequently occurring characteristics of tenants actively pursuing employment:

- limited or no family support;
- appearing employable but with a hidden barrier such as a past misdemeanor or felony conviction
- past or current substance use issues;
- problems relating easily to others or weak communication skills;
- afraid to go and ask for or apply for jobs.

Lessons Learned

CEP-IV staff have identified the following major lessons learned to date:

- It is very important for staff to spend time in the community forming relationships with tenants. Tenants are often willing to share personal information in their home environment that they are not comfortable sharing in staff offices. For example, staff take tenants to coffee shops for informal conversations and many respond well to this approach.
- Staff tries to meet tenants “where they’re at.” This has contributed to establishing a high level of trust and candor between staff and clients, who do not feel the need to withhold information or lie in order to keep their housing.
- Focusing on tenants’ strengths and gifts has helped to refocus away from all of the things in their lives that are overwhelmingly negative, and help them to recognize positives attributes that will help them in the future.
- It is extremely useful to have the flexibility of placing tenants in abstinence-only housing or housing where safe substance use is tolerated.
- Partnering with other agencies is absolutely vital to the success of a client achieving their employment goals.
- Part of the challenge of the program is making the complicated interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration transparent to the tenant. Navigating all of the different bureaucracies the long-term homeless must deal with to survive takes incredible skill, perseverance, and organization. It is the CEP-IV team which is now faced with sorting this all out for their clients on a daily basis. As a result, the team has found it important to build in sufficient staff support and supervision. Just as staff becomes aware of all the trauma that tenants have survived in their lives, it is also important to recognize the vicarious trauma that affects staff who work with them. The CEP-IV program has faced its first wave of staff turnover and will be watching closely to see what kind of “life expectancy” there is in these kind of high impact, high intensity positions.

No formal evaluations of the CEP-IV program have been completed to date. Program staff have, however, identified three areas of challenge:

1. A significant focus of the project for the Department of Labor is on systems change, with the goal of helping make the workforce more accessible to people with severe disabilities. This focus must be integrated with HUD's emphasis on achieving permanent housing. This takes significant coordination and communication through many levels of government.
2. The budget originally submitted did not adequately cover the true costs of the team described in the proposal.
3. The Customized Employment approach is a highly intensive individual approach to job development. This approach has not previously been used within an ACT team. This demands an increased "front-end" effort in order to achieve greater long-term job success.

CEP-IV staff have also identified several areas for improvement in year two:

1. *Increase integration with the One-Stop, including space redesign.* Part of the systems change strategy for this grant involves making the Department of Labor-funded One-Stop Career Centers more accessible to people with severe disabilities. Operating under exacting performance requirements, these programs have not had any incentives to engage chronically homeless people. In fact, these individuals are often screened out of the employment services system. A review of records of current CEP-IV clients verify that many had at one time sought assistance from the One-Stop system but eventually dropped out or had their cases closed. CEP-IV is exploring ways in which customized employment strategies can be used with chronically homeless adults, and how these practices can be integrated into practice at a One-Stop. CCC is fortunate to be the operator of the One-Stop serving downtown Portland. CEP-IV staff has office space at this location and are working on ways in which the physical space of the two programs can become more closely aligned.
2. *Train all team members in employment approaches.* Since CEP is a multi-disciplinary team, each staff person brings a special expertise. It is important, however, that all team members embrace the philosophy that employment is a vehicle to recovery. Training efforts will focus on how each discipline can contribute to a client's success in housing and employment.
3. *Increased consumer involvement and input.* As a program that values self-determination, CEP-IV has identified the need to more actively encourage involvement of its consumers and to be seeking their input as to how this can best be done. To date there has been no formal mechanism for seeking consumer input and feedback. As part of its Federally Qualified Health Center, Central City Concern convenes a Health Services Advisory Council (HSAC), composed of service recipients. The program is currently looking at ways it might encourage involvement of CEP clients in the HSAC.
4. *Collaboration with other One-Stop Centers in the region.* CEP-IV is currently contracting with another local One-Stop to provide some hands-on training with CEP staff in how to "customize" employment. They, in turn, are being exposed for the first time to using these techniques with a chronic homeless population. As the team gains more experience in customized placements, they will share their experience with other One-Stops to demonstrate what kinds of systemic changes are necessary to achieve success with this population.
5. *Expansion of partnerships necessary to sustain services.* CEP-IV is a five-year demonstration project, during which time linkages and resources must be identified that can sustain the program when the grant ends. Central City Concern operates a Federally Qualified Health

Center which targets homeless individuals, and this funding source is being looked at as providing on-going support for many of the wrap-around services being provided by the grant. CEP is also looking at developing linkages with other agencies in order to tap into mainstream services for which tenants are eligible.

¹ ACT is a service-delivery model that provides comprehensive, locally based treatment to people with serious and persistent mental illnesses. Unlike other community-based programs, ACT is not a linkage or brokerage case-management program that connects individuals to mental health, housing, or rehabilitation agencies or services. Rather, it provides highly individualized services directly to consumers. ACT recipients receive the multidisciplinary, round-the-clock staffing of a psychiatric unit, but within the comfort of their own home and community. For homeless clients, this can mean providing services on the streets or in shelters. To have the competencies and skills to meet a client's multiple treatment, rehabilitation, and support needs, ACT team members are trained in the areas of psychiatry, social work, nursing, substance abuse, and vocational rehabilitation (definition from the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, www.nami.org).

² One-Stop Centers are conveniently located centers that provide employment, education, and training services all in one place. One-Stop Career Centers provide a wealth of information and assistance for job seekers, education and training seekers, and employers. Most One-Stop centers are funded by the US Department of Labor.

³ Motivational interviewing is a directive, client-centered counseling style for eliciting behavior change by helping clients to explore and resolve ambivalence. See www.motivationalinterviewing.org

⁴ A Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) is a community based health center which provides comprehensive primary health, oral, mental health, and substance use services to persons of all ages. FQHCs provide their services to all persons regardless of ability to pay, and charge for services on a community board approved sliding-fee scale that is based on patients' family income and size. For more information, see <http://www.cms.hhs.gov/medlearn/fqhcfactsheet.pdf>