

Erie VA Medical Center – Job Club for High Volume Employment Service Delivery
An Innovative Practice in VHA Homeless Program Operations

White Paper

VA



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INTRODUCTION

The VHA Homeless Program Office identifies and disseminates innovative practices in homeless program operations. The Erie VA Medical Center (VAMC) has been identified as a site with an innovative practice for their development of a Homeless Veteran Community Employment Service (HVCES) and Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) collaborative Job Club for Veterans seeking gainful employment.

PRACTICE OVERVIEW

Job Clubs are effective in helping Veterans achieve employment in areas with high demand for employment services.

While homeless programs leaders across VA, and formerly homeless Veterans themselves, recognize the critical role that gainful employment plays in long-term housing stability, in some instances it can be difficult to keep up with the demand for employment and vocational preparedness services. This was the case at the Erie VAMC in 2017 where the Community Employment Coordinator (CEC) and CWT staff reported consistently high volumes of Veterans walking-in for assistance. Unable to keep pace, the CEC wondered if the delivery of services could be done more effectively in a group format, serving multiple Veterans at the same time instead of individually. Through collaborative planning with the staff from Erie's CWT program, Job Club was born. One-part rapid vocational assessment, one-part employment services resource fair, Job Club was created to quickly and effectively assist all VHA health care eligible Veterans obtain employment, further their existing careers, or advance their education. Although initially conceived as a means of providing overviews of VA employment services that would lead to formal program enrollments, within the first few weekly sessions it was clear that Veterans just wanted to start doing the work of finding jobs.

Job Club was held every Monday, for three hours, at the Erie VAMC's Behavioral Health Building. First time Veterans were immediately invited to complete a Vocational Assessment Profile (VAP) screening and other questionnaires such as the RIASEC Model of Occupations (Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, Conventional) to help inform the development of their individualized employment plan. HVCES and CWT staff provided career advice and guidance based on the screening and assessment outcomes which helped highlight vocational and financial goals and identified strengths and barriers to employment. Once assessment and planning were completed, Veterans were able to begin the actual work of finding employment.



Non-VA intranet-connected workstations were available for Veterans to search for jobs with volunteers on hand to assist with using the computers or printing documents. Two light duty administrative assistant CWT-Transitional Work Experience (TWE) positions were created to assist with Job Club, paid through CWT program funds. These administrative assistants helped Veterans create or update resumes (with copies provided on free digital thumb-drives) or practice mock interviews. Solutions to any barriers identified from the screenings were addressed immediately whenever possible, such as providing bus passes for transportation challenges. Before they left Job Club for the day, Veterans were able to take home personalized binders with their assessment summaries and other flyers and brochures for VA and community resources. Veterans were encouraged to keep coming back each week until they were finally able to obtain gainful employment or meet their individual goal(s).

As word of Job Club's popularity spread, other VA and non-VA vocational providers decided to contribute by connecting enrolled Veterans to additional employment or vocational programs and benefits. New partners included staff from the local Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (DVOP) and Department of Labor (DOL) funded programs and actual local employers recruited by the CEC. Veterans were assisted with obtaining their DD214 and other supporting documentation. Interview clothing and work uniforms were provided through community referrals or Homeless Care Team donations. When indicated, some Veterans were screened for VA Schedule A eligibility and could also apply for Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) and Social Security Administration (SSA) financial benefits. When Veterans had sensitive barriers to employment such as certain criminal histories, they were able to meet individually with the CEC for individual counseling. The employers provided Veterans with an opportunity for face-to-face contact to learn more about the employers' needs and requirements for any available positions. As an added benefit, these contacts allowed for onsite job interviews and submission of applications. Even the Erie VAMC's Human Resources Management Service (HRMS) participated in Job Club to provide information on available employment, federal hiring practices, creating federal resumes, and various hiring authorities

"I cannot truly put into words what you have done for me these last 10 months. I have learned so much, and I'll never be able to return what you have given me. I did not think it was possible for me to work in an office, and you have shown me I can."

"Matt"
Erie VAMC Job Club
Graduate



Of the 194 Veterans who attended Job Club since 2017, 51 percent met their employment goal of employment in the community, including 68 Veterans (35 percent) who obtained full time employment. Additionally, 22 Veterans who obtained full time employment were active participants in VA homeless programs, including Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH), Grant and Per-Diem (GPD), and Community Emergency Residential Services (CERS). Job Club's success has been attributed to its low barrier access to resources, education, tools, skill development and individual attention provided by skilled, empowering VA staff and volunteers.

CONCLUSION

For facilities experiencing high demand for employment services, Job Clubs can be an effective model for ensuring that every Veteran seeking employment has all the help and preparation they need to be successful. We would like to thank the dedicated staff at the Erie VAMC for sharing their practice.

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