



Best Practice: Four Pillars Supported Employment for Recovering Drug Users

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CITY: VANCOUVER

POLICY AREA: PUBLIC HEALTH; WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

BEST PRACTICE

The Four Pillars Supported Employment is a project that provides recovering drug users with short term employment with the City of Vancouver with the aim of reintegrating them into the mainstream workforce and bringing stability to their lives.

ISSUE

Since the late 1980's, Vancouver has experienced significant public health and public safety problems as a result of drug related harm. These harms which included drug-related disease, mortality and crime assumed such crises proportions that, in 1997, a public health emergency was declared. Consequently, learning from Switzerland's innovative solutions to similar problems, Vancouver called on all levels of government and various stake holders to join forces in addressing the problem in a comprehensive, integrated and evidence-based manner under the Four Pillars Drug Strategy of Prevention, Treatment, Harm Reduction and Enforcement. This became the City's official drug policy. Since then, many partners have come together to work on various projects to reduce harm from drug use. The Four Pillars Supported Employment Project is one of such projects of the Four Pillars Policy.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The overarching goal of this project is to offer recovering drug users opportunities of short term, well-paid employment with the City of Vancouver, which furthers their chances for long term employment in the job market, which brings overall stability in their life – for example in the aspects of housing, personal life, finances and health - all of which reduce chances of relapse.

IMPLEMENTATION

In 2005, the Vancouver City Council endorsed a Prevention Plan which outlined a vision to prevent harm from drug use through 27 recommendations for action. One of these focused on providing support to individuals in recovery through employment within the city of Vancouver. Evidence shows that providing employment to drug users in recovery is a fundamental component of drug treatment and the subsequent continuum of care. It gives them financial independence, self-worth and dignity, which helps immensely towards relapse prevention and eventual reintegration in the community.

A council-endorsed recommendation drawn from evidence is thus being put into action through this project.

Project Development

Persons in recovery are first recruited and trained for job readiness by Embers Staffing Solutions, a community partner organization. They are then employed in temporary, unionized positions in the City of Vancouver's Engineering Department. During the term of employment, they are supported by a job coach from Embers with one-on-one meetings and group workshops on general life skills and job related issues such as managing finances, addressing conflict in the workplace, identifying life goals, monitoring progress, overcoming barriers, and post project job search support.

The project has been inspired by international best practices like Brisbane's "Working On" project in Australia that provides paid employment to recovering drug users within the City of Brisbane and Thailand's "Ruam Mit" project that provides vocational and skills training to street youth recovering from addiction.

In the pilot year of the Four Pillars Supported Employment Project, four participants were employed with Engineering's

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Water and Sewer departments. Two more persons were recruited with the Streets department in the following years making it a total of six recruits per year. Plans are underway to make a few positions available in the Parks department this year. In the future, it is hoped that more city departments join the partnership offering employment opportunities to more participants.

The city of Vancouver has been recognized over the last two years consecutively as Canada's Top 100 Employers for making a difference to the quality of lives of individuals, their families and the community by fulfilling a key role in recovery from addiction.

Partners

The project is coordinated by the City of Vancouver's Four Pillars Drug Policy which is partnered with:

Other City Departments: Engineering, Equal Employment Opportunities, Human Resources and Parks

Community Organization: Embers Staffing Solutions, and *The Union:* CUPE 1004.



A supported employment participant at work.



COST

Annual budget including in-kind costs is approximately \$ 300,000 CDN (\$291,715 USD).

RESULTS AND EVALUATION

The main expected outcome is assisting drug users to remain sober and get back to healthy lives. Other outcomes include general stability within the areas of housing, personal life, health and finances. External evaluations over the four years show



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promising results. All evaluations have been positive, recommending continuation and expansion of the project. In addition, a short term longitudinal study of past participants indicates that a majority of past participants are meaningfully employed or actively job searching and are stable in their lives with 30% of them connecting with full-time employment within six months after the project.

TIMELINE

The project is in its fourth year of implementation and in its sixth year including the planning stage. The years 2005 and 2006 were devoted to scoping out partners and planning the project with them. Implementation started as a pilot in 2007. It has been running successfully since then over spring and summer of every year.

LEGISLATION

There is no particular legislation related to the implementation of the project.

LESSONS LEARNED

Over the years, several strengths and weaknesses of the project have been identified. Lessons learned from these have been promptly acted upon in the following year. An example of this was last year's recommendation that a regular system of support for participants and employers be available instead of support on an ad hoc basis. As a result, this year, regular workshops have been scheduled for participants every other week and support for employers has been put into place with a regular check in by the job coach.

Another lesson learned is that participants working at jobs less physically demanding have more chances of project completion. Hence, the project is trying to elicit partnerships from departments offering such jobs, i.e. Parks.

It is understood that there will be a certain degree of attrition associated with this project. However, one of the lessons learned is that many of those participants unable to complete the project due to relapse or other reasons had been successful, in the long run in finding employment and were leading stable lives. Thus, success is contextual, it should not be evaluated through conventional measures, it may not be evident immediately but the benefits may last beyond the term of the project.

TRANSFERABILITY

It is hoped that other City departments partner with this project. In addition, this project offers a model that can be replicated by other jurisdictions regionally, nationally or internationally.

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Facts and figures in this report were provided by the highlighted city agency to New York City Global Partners.