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The City of Vancouver Four Pillars Supported Employment Pilot Project



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The City of Vancouver Four Pillars Supported Employment Pilot Project

Background

The project aimed to provide individuals who were in recovery from substance use with a gradual and supported return to work. It was proposed that individuals would work 40 hour weeks and attend two five hour training sessions on alternate weeks. The project was developed by the Drug Policy Program, City of Vancouver, and was designed to operate for 26 weeks from April 30, 2007.

Two full-time-equivalent positions were created within the City of Vancouver (CoV) Waterworks and Sewer Operations at entrance level (“blue hats”). Four individuals shared the two positions, with two participants working for the Waterworks and two for the Sewer Operations. If participants left before the end of the project, they were to have been replaced by another individual.

From the outset, it was recognized that ongoing and individual support for the four participants was essential so that issues could be resolved quickly rather than participants feeling overwhelmed by problems. It was hoped this level of support would help participants sustain their employment. Support was to have been provided from three sources: the Case Coordination Project (CCP), the training program, and through a mentor attached to the project - these are discussed below.

Recruitment

The usual CoV recruitment process was amended for the project. Individuals were accepted onto the project if they met the eligibility criteria and passed the standard medical exam. Participants were not required to attend an interview or to submit a résumé. Instead, participants were recruited from CCP, which is based in the Downtown Eastside and managed by Building Opportunities for Business (BOB). CCP works with individuals who have been unemployed for long periods of time and who experience multiple barriers in returning to work. CCP has been operating since 2005 and employed nine Case Coordinators. Within any project, a Case Coordinator delivers individualized services and support to clients to help them become more self-reliant as well as, when possible, helping them to obtain and sustain employment. To recruit participants for the Four Pillars Project, Case Coordinators went through their client lists to identify those who might be suitable and who were fit for work.

Despite having extensive client lists, however, Case Coordinators found it difficult to recruit four clients who would be able to sustain a 40 hour work week in a physically demanding job because many of their clients had complex health needs. To enhance recruitment, Case Coordinators contacted other Downtown Eastside projects to identify suitable and eligible individuals. Case Coordinators met with potential participants and explained what was involved. They also used this meeting to check that the individuals met the eligibility criteria of being fit for work. If individuals did and wanted to participate in the Four Pillars Project, appointments for medicals were arranged.

Nine such appointments were set up, resulting in four individuals being deemed fit to work. Some individuals selected for the project had difficulties attending the appointment. All participants selected met with the Job Developer, who was also part of CCP, to ensure they had everything they needed to start work. This included having appropriate work clothes, money for bus tickets and lunch as well as addressing any concerns participants had about returning to work. The Job Developer also provided ongoing support to the participants throughout the project and acted as a liaison between workplace supervisors and the participants, when required.

Starting Work

Four men began work with the CoV at the end of April 2007. They agreed to work and attend training sessions on alternate weeks. They were paid the standard CoV rates plus 12 per cent in lieu of benefits for the weeks they worked. They did not receive any pay during the weeks they attended compulsory training sessions.

The four participants were excited and proud to be starting work for the CoV; they were also apprehensive about returning to work. While all were pleased to be thought “ready to work,” they were worried about their ability to do the job. All participants had previous work experience; most of them had worked on a casual basis within construction industries, but they had not been able to sustain full-time regular employment for a variety of reasons, including health, personal and addiction issues, and coping with the social aspects of employment. Participants discussed these issues with the Job Developer before they began work and tried to develop strategies to help them cope with the challenges of working.

For all participants, having a “real job” with a good employer was important, as was earning approximately \$23 per hour during the weeks they worked. This income level resulted in them being significantly better off compared to living on Income Assistance. While the money was important to the participants, what it signified to them was even more so: life was moving forward and they had a good chance to achieve something - namely, getting enough money to move out of the DTES, paying fines, and being able to prove to friends and family they had made positive changes.

When the participants started working, they found it physically very demanding. Supervisors and managers reported that this was an expected reaction as the jobs involved hard labour. As a result, the participants were pleased to have the one week at work and one week at training sessions.

What to tell colleagues?

Participants were assigned to work crews. Crew members were aware that participants were not “regular employees” as they were there for one week and away the next. Supervisors and managers also provided work crews with some general information about the project so they knew what to expect. On the whole, colleagues were accepting of the participants. Some participants were very open about their pasts and the issues they had addressed; others were reticent to do this and just wanted to be seen as another employee.

Attrition

Of the four participants who began the project, two left within the first couple of months. One participant did not enjoy the work, but also explained he was too soon into his recovery

to cope with working full-time. He also found social aspects of employment challenging and left to start a part-time, supported position. Another participant returned to rehabilitation. Although the original intention had been to replace these participants, this did not happen as it was considered too resource intensive to arrange medicals and to provide work and health and safety training. CCP did recruit two additional individuals who attended the training component and hoped to join the project. These individuals, who received food vouchers for attending, continued to attend training sessions despite knowing they would not work for the CoV as part of the project.

Working

Participants were assigned to work crews with experienced supervisors able to provide support and ensure that safety protocols were followed. Participants were not left working on their own. Supervisors believed this was important in light of health and safety implications.

Although participants found the work physically demanding, they reported they got used to this within the first month. The remaining two participants enjoyed the work and, more importantly for them, they enjoyed working. There were initial challenges with establishing routines and, in a couple of instances, coping with the social dynamics of employment. In these situations, supervisors liaised with the Job Developer to help resolve these issues.

When asked about their work, participants described themselves as part of the crew. They were “blue hats” but they hoped to progress beyond this general entry level. They were not left to struggle on their own as there were people around who they could ask for help. Participants liked the variety of tasks and felt they were learning. Their self-esteem and confidence grew as a result of being part of the project. They were also pleased to be part of a work crew.

Aligning the Expectations of Participants and Supervisors

This study reveals a mismatch between the expectations of participants and supervisors. Supervisors and managers understood the project to be a work experience initiative which would end on December 14, 2007. While they did not rule out the possibility of hiring a participant, it was unlikely to happen in this instance. They believed they had slightly lower expectations of the participants in terms of performance.

Participants, on the other hand, thought they were doing really well and hoped they would be employed after the project finished. They reported they had received positive feedback from their workmates and supervisors and were optimistic the project would lead to regular employment.

Part of the confusion around what would happen after the project is likely to be related to the municipal strike during the summer and fall of 2007. During this strike, the participants did not work nor attend training sessions as they were on strike. When the strike ended, they were moved to full-time employment that was due to end in mid-December 2007. The rationale for this was to make up for the 12 weeks participants lost due to the strike. Participants, however, interpreted this as the end of the original project as they were no longer attending training sessions and were subsequently employed on a full-time basis.

This mismatch in expectations demonstrates the need for clear and concise communication with participants. Participants were given approximately one week’s notice

that they were not required after the December 14. There were a number of reasons for this lack of notice, including being worried about how participants might react. What this situation highlights, however, is the need for an exit strategy so the necessary support for the participants are in place and the benefits from being part of the project are capitalized on — namely, participants could be directed to further work or training. This did not happen in this instance as Case Coordinators and the Job Developer did not know the end date ahead of time. Participants had been hoping they would be kept on and, as a result, were left wondering what they did wrong and what else they should have done in order to be offered a job.

Support and Training

Three sources of supports for participants were incorporated into the project — namely, support from a case coordinator, contextual training, and support from a mentor.

Case Coordinator Support

Participants were assigned to a Case Coordinator who could provide individualized support. Within CCP, there was also a Job Developer who worked with clients to help them find and sustain employment. Participants in the project used both Case Coordinators and the Job Developer to help them resolve issues. The Job Developer checked in with the participants when they attended training sessions, and participants phoned or met with the Job Developer as they needed to. In some situations, the Job Developer was also able to work with supervisors and managers to resolve issues.

Contextual Training

The biweekly training sessions were provided by the Hastings Institute. Training consisted of two five-hour sessions that ran from 8a.m. to 1p.m. Training sessions' objective was to use writing to address issues raised by participants and to make them relevant to work. There was no formal curriculum. To improve the group dynamic, the two reserve candidates for the project also attended these sessions on a weekly basis.

Participants had mixed opinions about the training component of the project — some wanted more structure, while others liked the open-learning concept. It is difficult to assess the training component because of the disruption to classes caused by the strike. Although training sessions continued to run and were attended by the reserve candidates, participants did not attend during the strike. In effect, participants only attended for five to six weeks. During this time, it became clear that the training component faced a number of challenges related to the following:

- Small class size
- Individuals with differing agendas and abilities
- Some volatile individuals
- Finding a balance between maintaining interest and making the training sessions work-relevant.

Suggestions for Training Component

In discussing the training sessions with all involved with the project, a number of suggestions were made:

- Start the training component before participants begin work and use it to identify individuals who are “work-ready.”
- Run training sessions every day. This may help to improve attendance at medicals and workplace training sessions.
- Pay participants an honorarium for attending training sessions. Although participants attended because they had to, earning money every other week made it difficult for participants to manage financially.
- Participants appreciated working and attending training sessions on a biweekly basis for the first month or so, but they wanted to work full-time after this period. If participants are working full-time sooner, this may alleviate some of the difficulties experienced by managers and supervisors in terms of managing work.

Mentor Support

The participants did not contact the mentor during this project. They explained they all had access to the support they required via the Job Developer.

The Four Pillars Project and the Participants

Finding suitable participants for the project proved time-consuming and challenging. For those participants who were recruited, being part of this project marked a significant turning point in their lives. They enjoyed being involved in the project, and even though they found it demanding they also found it rewarding. The two participants who completed the project were pleased to have done so and commented on how they had not been able to do this in the past. They had a real sense of achievement, and they attributed improved self-esteem and confidence to being part of the project. Both participants were very determined to move on with their lives. These two participants also benefited in terms of having a recent work history with a reputable employer and saw this as something they could use in the future.

The Four Pillars Project and the Waterworks and Sewer Operations

Both the Waterworks and Sewer Operations were pleased to have been part of the project. They recognized the benefits for the participants and noted that it was important to be seen to be giving back to the community. The project, however, required an up-front investment in workplace training sessions that had not been expected. The recruitment process would need to be improved if the project is to run again so that both Waterworks and Sewer Operations could have some input into who was assigned to their work crews. Managing the job-share component was challenging and the implications of this need to be revisited.

One of the main concerns of supervisors and managers was in relation to the participants' expectations. There was a need for clarity around the project's objective — was it a transition to work or a work-experience project?

Conclusions

The findings of this study should be seen as indicative rather than conclusive. While the findings should be treated with caution— partly because of the disruption of the municipal strike — the evidence suggests the following:

- Not just a good, but a *great* idea
- Small project with big potential
- Made a significant difference in the participants' lives
- Needs to be clarity about the parameters and expectations for all involved
- Some aspects of the project need to be reviewed
- The project should be linked to support within HR and other relevant departments
- Co-operation between agencies and organizations
- It was a good project for the CoV to be part of
- Preliminary evidence that it is a good model; next step is to extend it or, at least, confirm findings

Information about this study:

The Four Pillar Supported Employment Pilot Project was an initiative of the Drug Policy Program, City of Vancouver. This study was conducted by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC). For further information, please contact:

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