

Supported Employment in the Clubhouse
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Unlike Transitional Employment, which is well described in Clubhouse literature, Supported Employment is less defined, sometimes misunderstood, and has a dubious Clubhouse history. There remains a fair amount of disagreement regarding the efficacy of a Clubhouse developing its own, in-house, Supported Employment program. There is also the concern that a growing emphasis on Supported Employment may detract from our effort to maintain quality Transitional Employment Programs. The time has come us to discuss these concerns as a community.

Before beginning, I think it is critical to discuss some of the semantics related to the definition of Supported Employment and Independent Employment. For many people, these two names are synonymous. Since we first started describing our Supported Employment program, I have met many Clubhouse people that have asked what the difference between Independent Employment and Supported Employment is?

I believe there is a fundamental difference between Supported Employment and Independent Employment, although the difference has changed over the years. When I am describing our Supported Employment program, I still have people say to me “Oh, yeah, we do that too but we call it Independent Employment.” It is critical for Clubhouses to differentiate between what is truly Supported Employment and what is Independent Employment. So, what is the difference? The easiest way for me to attempt to answer this question is to start with our story.

I tell this story not to suggest that we are unique, but rather it is our hope that this story will sound familiar. From our inception in 1989, Potter Place was able to establish a successful TE program, providing many, diverse, and meaningful job opportunities to members. Our experiences with Transitional Employment included many remarkable achievements and our share of disappointing challenges. In all, the early years of TE at Potter Place were largely typical of a new Clubhouse, with many members completing six month placements, employers coming and going, and the occasional members moving on to their own jobs after TE.

It is hard to determine what factors contributed to those members that were able to make that jump from a completed TE to their first Independent placements. We do know that those members were the exception. It was rare for any of those members to meet the original full-time definition of Independent Employment. It was even rarer for those jobs to be career-oriented with livable wages. Our Employment Unit was quickly filling with members who had completed various TE positions and desired their own careers. They had some idea of what they wanted to do. They were confident in their ability to work. They were even willing to fill out applications, interview with employers, and “pound the pavement.” Many of them were getting help from Potter Place. The only problem is that

most of those members were not getting jobs. For those few members that did get jobs, they were often short-lived.

In 1995, over the course of many months, Potter Place took on the task of looking for a new way to help members move from TE to their own meaningful careers. We visited many programs and some Clubhouses to see what was available. We soon learned that we liked the services offered in a standard Supported Employment program and were impressed with the success of Clubhouses that had partnered with outside SE programs or organizations. Deep down, we knew that we could do even better than the SE programs, particularly if we combined their services with the Clubhouse philosophy and unit structure.

Our Supported Employment Program is very simple, and profoundly effective. We have a weekly work meeting for members looking for a career or simply a job. We work individually with members to prepare resumes, practice interviewing, and organize their job search. When we are out, in the community, we are actively promoting our members who are looking for work. We often work directly with the member and the employer when the job starts. The entire Clubhouse shares the responsibility of training members on SE and providing on-going support as requested. We are open in the evening to support working members at the Clubhouse.

Over the years, we have established some important characteristics of our Supported Employment Program. Our Supported Employment development is focused on the needs of the individual member. This flexibility allows Supported Employment development to be career specific. This is different from Transitional Employment development, which must focus on the needs of the Clubhouse collective membership and Transitional Employment program. With Supported Employment, the individual member's needs must be met for there to be any chance of success. We found that to do this effectively, we needed to move beyond the bounds of our current employer network and begin establishing relationships with new employers. This effort would prove valuable for our entire employment continuum.

Often used as a defining characteristic of Supported Employment is the established relationship between the Clubhouse and the employer. This can result in on-site training for members, on-going follow-up, and even support for the employer. Of equal importance is that this relationship with the employer often opens doors for members that may not have easily accessed employment on their own. When the Clubhouse actively develops employment opportunities with the member, the reputation of the Clubhouse and the support services that are available to the employer become valuable assets for the member.

As with other functions of the Clubhouse, our Supported Employment services have always been offered through our work-ordered day, particularly in our Membership Services Unit. Our success is based on the relationship that members have with our Clubhouse. Supported Employment is not offered by a separate program of the Clubhouse or by employment specialists.

The most important characteristic of our Supported Employment Program is that it is based on a strong foundation of Transitional Employment. In the many years of operating our SE program, we have always maintained our commitment to a quality and Standards-Based Transitional Employment Program. We continue to strengthen our Transitional Employment program by developing new positions and upgrading old positions. We do this because we are confident that the success of our entire employment continuum is dependent on the quality of our Transitional Employment Program.

Almost immediately, we found that more members were having greater access to our TE program. This was primarily because members were doing fewer TE placements before starting their own career or getting their own jobs. With members doing fewer TE placements, there were more opportunities for other members to try a TE. This was good.

We also found that the faster members moved from the work-ordered day to Transitional Employment to Supported Employment, there became fewer and fewer members eagerly awaiting TE jobs. This was also good, but it made the challenge of managing TE positions even harder.

As hard as it is to manage a Transitional Employment Program and both a Supported Employment and Independent Employment Program, I believe it is well worth the effort. Clubhouse members deserve all the advantages of a complete employment continuum. Only a Clubhouse allows the opportunity to benefit from the high accessibility and valuable jump-start that is Transitional Employment, the tailored and career oriented services of Supported Employment, and the on going, Clubhouse centered support of Independent Employment.

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