

Barriers to Employment for People with Mental Illness

Thursday, March 4, 2010, at 4:00 p.m.

The Universities at Shady Grove
The Camille Kendall Academic Center
Building III, Room 3241
9636 Gudelsky Drive
Rockville, MD 20850

The Issue

The number of individuals qualifying for disability benefits due to mental illness, and not working as a result, has grown rapidly in recent years. While effective treatments exist for most mental disorders, many Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) beneficiaries with mental illness who want to work do not have access to the treatment and employment support services they need to return to the workforce. In addition, perceived and actual barriers at multiple levels exist that prevent some people with mental illness from achieving their goal of returning to work.

Background

Westat is conducting the Mental Health Treatment Study (MHTS), sponsored by the Social Security Administration. The MHTS is a 3 ½-year randomized trial demonstration that creates access to evidenced-based medical and behavioral health treatment and supported employment services for SSDI beneficiaries with a primary impairment of schizophrenia or affective disorder. The intended outcomes for beneficiaries in the treatment group include improved clinical recovery and functioning, and positive employment outcomes within the 24-month time frame of their participation in the MHTS. The MHTS is being implemented at 23 demonstration sites. It is a collaborative effort with Dartmouth College, the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, the University of Maryland Baltimore County, Value Options, and Hirsch Financial with Westat as the prime contractor. In addition to addressing research questions related to how the intervention leads to positive outcomes for treatment group participants, the MHTS seeks to understand the reasons why beneficiaries decline to participate and why some participating beneficiaries have less successful outcomes than others.

What We Know

Although evidence-based supported employment has significantly increased the rates of competitive employment for all major groups of adults with mental illness, many of these clients still do not achieve their employment goals. The literature on vocational and supported employment services for persons with severe mental illness identifies four types of client barriers to employment: lack of engagement, cognitive impairment, deficits in interpersonal functioning, and psychiatric symptoms. In addition, research focusing on why individuals with mental illness are reluctant to return to the work force has identified fears, misconceptions, discouragement, and lack of confidence to be reoccurring themes.

Goals for the Presentation

The presentation will:

- Provide a brief overview of the MHTS and the study participants.
- Provide a brief summary of the community resources available in Montgomery County, Maryland, for persons with psychiatric disabilities.
- Discuss barriers at the recruitment level and reasons for refusal to participate.
- Discuss barriers to employment success among participants receiving the MHTS intervention.
- Discuss success stories that exemplify how some of the barriers can be overcome and the lessons learned throughout the process.
- Discuss implications for mental health providers, employers, researchers, and family members.

Presenters

Roline Milfort, PhD, Senior Study Director, Westat. Dr. Milfort is a developmental psychologist with 9 years of research experience in developmental psychology, maternal and child health, research design, data collection management, and program evaluation. Dr. Milfort is the Director of Operations for the MHTS.

Shree Paralkar, Program Manager for Supported Employment, St. Luke's House. St. Luke's House in Silver Spring, Maryland, is one of the 22 demonstration sites where the MHTS is being implemented. The treatment team working with study participants includes supported employment specialists, rehabilitation counselors, therapists, and case managers. Mr. Paralkar oversees supported employment and other related services at St. Luke's House.