



# The Employment Market for Young Adults with Mental Health Conditions: Obstacles & Innovative Strategies for Implementing Supported Employment

Lisa M. Smith, B.A. & Charles W. Lidz, Ph.D.



## Abstract

For young adults with serious mental health conditions (SMHC) employment is a key to recovery. However, employment among this group remains a substantial problem, with most research suggesting, that many young adults with SMHC do less well than similar older adults. Most models of supported employment require that employment specialists do job development for their clients and substantially de-emphasize preparatory work with the client.

Based on intensive, one hour in person/phone interviews with 12 employment specialists, this poster will highlight challenges in the employment market that have made job development by individual employment specialists substantially more difficult. Interviewees also described two different innovative job development strategies that seemed to skirt some of these problems, but both required access to higher levels in the potential employing organizations.

## Employment & Young Adult Goals

- Supported Employment (SE) developed to provide employment for chronically mentally ill people, often subsequent to long-term state hospital stays
  - Typically episodic, part-time, and entry level
- Many young adults with SMHC seek full-time, significant employment careers. Our services should encourage those goals.

The Evidence-based Practice in employment for people with a mental illness is Individual Placement & Support (IPS)<sup>1</sup>:

- Open to anyone who wants to work
- Focus on competitive employment
- Rapid job search
- Systematic job development
- Client preferences guide decisions
- Individualized long-term supports
- Integrated with treatment
- Benefits counseling included

<sup>1</sup>Dartmouth IPS Supportive Employment Center:  
<http://sites.dartmouth.edu/ips/about-ips/ips-practice-principles/>

## Questions the Study Addresses

How does the employment market for young adults differ from that of older people with a history of chronic mental health conditions?

What are the barriers to full-time employment in career advancing jobs for young adults with serious mental health conditions (SMHCs)?

How might employment programs be improved to facilitate young adult careers?

## Young Adult Career Goals

I: *Do they express that they want more of a career than just...*

*"They want something that is meaningful."* Employment Specialist (ES)11

*"And yeah, they do think that they can...go on to college...get the career...live the "normal" life. So yeah, I mean a lot of them do say I think right now I can only work at a grocery store but I do want to go to college and I do want to get a career,which is like yay!"* ES10

## Barriers

### Stigma

*"I'll be honest, I don't necessarily market it as a program that helps people with mental illness. I market it as, okay we're a program that market's people with disabilities with employment. ... I say well-they have some cognitive challenges or ...mental health challenges."* ES5

*"Instead of phrasing it that I work for somebody with a disability, I say of varying ... You kind of make it sound more normal so that way it doesn't quite sound as negative."* ES10

### Mental Health System Scheduling

*"They [clients] do have really full schedules at the [Service], a lot of it is not mandatory but you better be there...okay IMR is in the middle of Wednesday and the transportation ends at 7 ...DBT group on Thursday and they have therapy once...a week....psychiatry once a month. They start really having some availability problems."* ES9

### Risk SSI

*"The biggest barrier is the support system... it is such a fear base thing. It is the [service provider]. Parents. It starts in the adolescence. It's docs and therapists and benefits, don't risk your benefits.... They go home and hear what their parents are saying, 'be careful before you take that you're going to lose your SSI.'" ES1*



## Employment Advantages & Challenges

*"Most employers are more open to working with young adults than adults, because they can be a sponge, they haven't picked up a lot of bad habits, they're still learning, so that's actually a plus!"* ES12

*"I think there are some things that are a huge plus. Technology, you know young adults can run circles around older people with technology..."* ES3

*"Lack of skills. I have one young adult right now...only finished the eighth grade. Came from a family with significant substance abuse issues. His brother was killed in a gang related incident. Lack of education. Drug use. Substance abuse."* ES5

*"Many of the individuals haven't gone to a traditional school or...had a traditional upbringing so they don't have a lot of the...soft skills that are necessary to have a job. Many of our guys are terrible with scheduling...impulse problems...learning disabilities, educational deficits. They don't have the role models. They don't know what it's like to work."* ES7

## Job Development Challenges

*"So yeah and sometimes the places where we go, even the management, the turnover is high... so even every time I go in and meet someone I may have to start over."* ES8

*"Part of the problem is that it's all online and a lot of the kind of discretionary decisions are taken away from managers....They could think I'm great and love [our service] and think this is fantastic work but okay, hope they get through the assessment. So, that's a big problem. So that's why I get apply online over and over and over again."* ES9

## Career Paths

*"Its been challenging to find people work. Like the entry level things are easier and Dunkin Donuts...but to find something that's more career oriented or put them on a path, that's been challenging."* ES11

*"People are kind of stuck in the same dead end job and just being grateful for what they have, which is good, but like the growth is not the same."* ES6

## Weakness & Strength of Supported Employment-Immediacy

*"There's goal planning, I try not to focus on that right away. Sometimes it can be- 'oh I got to do this first, I thought you were going to help me find a job now you're telling me I got to do a goal plan?"* ES3

*"(training) It's not part of our model. I'm not sure cause we try to focus on employment but with the economy, I will lead them to a training."* ES8

## Conclusions

Traditional job development is largely irrelevant career development for youth due to:

- Online application process
- Centralization of hiring policy
- The jobs that can be developed are entry level only

Many young adults want careers, but need more training and education (Supported Education and/or internships?)

Rapid placement is particularly important for young adults (perhaps in paid internships or education)

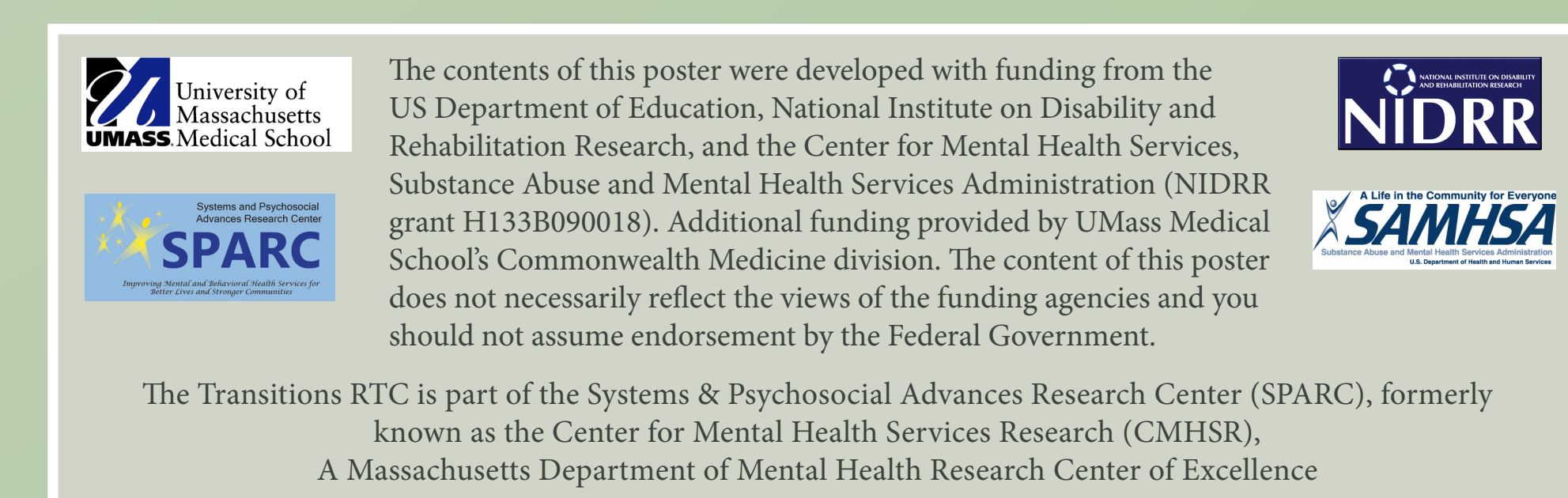
SSI benefits should not be encouraged but preserved for those who need them.

New methods of job development are essential.



## Innovative Job Development Strategies

1. Coordinated efforts by multiple service providers to reach higher up in the corporate hierarchy.
2. Collaboration among various mental health services that provided supported employment i.e., shared known job opportunities and one central job development group was able to speak for all of them and contacted senior managers among the employers.



The contents of this poster were developed with funding from the US Department of Education, National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, and the Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (NIIDRR grant H133B090018). Additional funding provided by UMass Medical School's Commonwealth Medicine division. The content of this poster does not necessarily reflect the views of the funding agencies and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

The Transitions RTC is part of the Systems & Psychosocial Advances Research Center (SPARC), formerly known as the Center for Mental Health Services Research (CMHSR), A Massachusetts Department of Mental Health Research Center of Excellence