



Employment Specialist, Ryan Boyd told of one of his clients who got a job at an elementary school. The client was employed successfully but sometimes had panic attacks that would interfere with her ability to work.

“We found out that if we took a walk around the block every day, she could deal with the panic,” Mr. Boyd said.

The short walk to alleviate panic attacks is just one of a myriad of techniques used by Employment Specialists in mental health centers across Kansas.

Mr. Boyd works at Valeo Behavioral Health Center in Topeka. He is one of seven employment specialists at the agency. Their job: help people diagnosed with severe and persistent mental illness find and keep employment.

“A lot of folks have a plethora of issues,” said Mr. Boyd. “We work on symptoms management.”

Valeo is one of 14 mental health centers across Kansas involved in a supported employment program utilizing evidence-based practices to help people with mental illness find and keep work. Many of their clients have not worked for years, or have had sporadic employment until their mental illness causes a problem that costs them the job.

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Client diagnosis ranges from severe anxiety, depression, bi-polar disorder, schizophrenia, and many other mental health disorders.

The program was the result of a national project begun to identify best practices for gaining employment for persons with psychiatric disorders. Kansas was one of three states chosen to take part in the initial program involving supported employment.

The results so far: For all programs utilizing evidence-based practices in supported employment, 40 percent of people served are now working. About 7,600 people with severe and persistent mental illness are served by the program statewide.

After receiving a referral, which most often come from case managers at the mental health center, the Employment Specialist always takes the time to get to know the client and find out what kind of work they are interested in. They also talk with the client about their skills and background.



Amie Greene, another Employment Specialist at Valeo, told of a client of hers who recently found a job at a pet store. Among other diagnoses, this client was dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder and bi-polar disorder.

“She said she wanted to work with children or with animals,” Ms. Greene said.

In talking to the veterinarian where she takes her own dog, Ms. Greene said she found a possible position for the client. She said she was honest with the vet, pointing out that her client seldom made eye contact and would be very nervous during a job interview.

The client got the job, and even surprised everyone by making eye contact and showing interest during the interview. At first she was assigned to clean cages and kennels and take animals for walks.

“Now they even have her administering medications,” Ms. Greene said, explaining that many times clients take on new responsibilities after they become comfortable in the environment and the routine.

According to Kristen Farley, who has been supervising Employment Specialists at Valeo for five years after working as an Employment Specialist for two years, a key to finding success for people with mental illness is truly believing everyone can work.

“A lot of people say that, but don’t really believe it,” she said. “It’s a core part of the program. Ryan and Amie are so good at that.”

Mr. Boyd said finding successful employment is therapeutic for the client.

“If someone is not stable, hearing voices, anxious, we still consider them employable,” he said. “Employment can help them stabilize.”

Mr. Boyd said a big part of his job is working with employers to find jobs for clients.

“In this community, you go to any business, they probably know of us,” he said. “We educate people about mental illness.”

“We don’t go out and ask for pity,” he added. “We think of all our clients as assets to companies. They all help out the business.”

There is no normal day for employment specialists at mental health centers. Ms. Greene shows the daily planner on her desk, with many scheduled appointments or dates crossed out or changed.

“There is never a dull moment,” she said of the work. “Every day is different. The way the program works, the client comes to us, we help prepare their resume and then we job search together.”

Mr. Boyd said he has worked with clients with many different backgrounds, usually maintaining a caseload of 15 to 20 people. He mentioned working with someone with a law degree, a former manager of a major farm operation, an engineer, and many others.

“There are endless possibilities; our client base is so diverse, “ said Ryan.

Employment Specialists also work with clients and employers to help the clients Social Security Administration benefits.

Because of their disability, many clients receive Social Security Disability benefits that provides health insurance that pays for expensive mental health prescriptions and a cash benefit. SSA rules on benefits limit the amount of money people can earn from employment, although a program called Ticket to Work is available that allows additional earnings while keeping health insurance. The Working Healthy program also provides support for people with disabilities to keep their medical insurance while working.

Ms. Greene said much of their work with clients is done in the community, not in an office.

“It’s been proven clients do better meeting in the community rather than some stuffy office,” she said. “We meet where they’re comfortable.”



~~Employment specialists at mental health centers see clients as assets to businesses~~