

Not Homeless by Choice: The Struggle for Employment

By Heather Stergos



Those who are homeless are often faced with the misconception that they choose to be, or at least they choose not to work; that they could get a job if they wanted one. This could not be farther from the truth. The reality is that the homeless are faced with unique challenges when it comes to finding and maintaining employment.

Mental health and physical health are both often significant barriers to employment. Research shows that a large segment of the homeless population suffers from undiagnosed and/or untreated mental illness. Those who have been diagnosed, typically do not have the financial means to fill prescriptions or attend therapy. Though there are now many programs that provide free basic health care to the homeless population, those programs offering free mental health care are few and far between. With untreated illnesses such as bipolar disorder and schizophrenia – two of the most common diagnoses among the homeless – it is almost impossible for these individuals to function consistently enough to seek and then keep employment.

Untreated physical illnesses are another plague for the homeless. Everything from malnutrition, to untreated infections and chronic illnesses to untreated injuries and conditions that are a typical part of the aging process are endured without proper medical care, medication or medical supplies. It is difficult to seek employment under these conditions, let alone maintain a job.

Substance abuse disorders are another issue facing a large percentage of the homeless population. The homeless often turn to substances in order to ease the stress associated with being homeless, and for many, they arrived on the street because of a substance abuse problem. As with mental health, there are few programs available for the homeless population to treat substance abuse issues, creating a vicious, never-ending cycle.

Another significant barrier to employment is the digital divide. Many of those who are homeless have not had access to the ever-changing world of cyberspace. They don't have experience with the Internet or other various forms of technology that others are very familiar with. This can be an issue for many employers. It is also an issue for the homeless themselves who, fearing failure, as well as feeling self-conscious or embarrassed by their lack of knowledge, do not try to interview for certain positions. Lack of education and college experience are also often cited as barriers to employment.

An often-overlooked basic barrier to employment for the homeless is the inability to purchase work clothes, take showers regularly or take care of other personal hygiene issues, all of which most of us take for granted. The simplest tasks, things that we all do to prepare for a job interview without thinking, are often insurmountable hurdles for this population. It is difficult to win employment when just taking a shower, buying deodorant or washing your clothes are all mammoth tasks. Criminal histories and bad credit are also barriers to employment for the homeless.

The best way to make employment more accessible for the homeless is to eradicate the barriers they face. Providing free mental health care and treatment, medical care and educational and training programs are things that are being done in many cities with positive results, but more needs to be done. Simple things such as donating "work" clothes and hygiene products to shelters and other programs that assist the homeless can be incredibly helpful. Many shelters offer classes that help individuals learn how to interview, how to dress and present themselves. Research shows that transitional housing programs are effective in assisting the homeless in finding employment. A recent study found that upon entry to the transitional housing program only 27% of the homeless were employed and upon exit the number had increased to 50%. Supporting these programs is another way to help in the quest for employment. Most of those who are homeless and unemployed are not so by choice and this stigma is a barrier in and of itself but one that each of us

can help in tearing down by advocating for those things that make employment opportunities more accessible for the homeless.

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