

Assisting People Facing Homelessness in the Personal Support Program

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The Personal Support Program (PSP) is funded by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) and assists people with multiple non-vocational barriers, including homelessness, to achieve social and economic outcomes appropriate to them. Of the suite of adult employment programs funded by DEWR it is distinctive in its support for job seekers facing homelessness, but it is unclear to what extent providers should deliver employment assistance at the same time as addressing participants' housing needs.

PSP is delivered by contracted providers in the non-government sector and was expected to work with 50,000 people in 2005-6. It uses a case management model to work with participants over a two-year period or less if they move into employment or education, enter an alternative labour market program or withdraw voluntarily. Agencies delivering the program provide counselling and personal support, referral to appropriate local services, practical assistance and outreach.

While employment is seen as a desirable outcome, the focus is primarily on addressing personal barriers before moving clients into other employment assistance programs or employment directly, rather than tackling them concurrently. There are no specific funds for training and education and no specific employment initiatives such as supported work placement. However, participants are exempt from activity test requirements applicable to other job seekers.

Many aspects of this model are in line with best practice approaches to working with jobseekers facing multiple personal barriers identified in research in the US and Europe. These include:

- a holistic model of assistance
- strong partnerships with local agencies connecting to a wide range of support services
- a focus on addressing clients' underlying personal barriers
- smaller case loads than regular employment assistance, and more intensive case management
- recognition that some clients are unable to work or meet regular

welfare-to-work requirements before addressing personal barriers

- a broad definition of outcomes extending beyond an employment focus (Perkins 2005).

However, one component identified as essential that is lacking from PSP is integrated employment assistance for those clients who have the capacity to re-enter the workforce. Other missing elements include intensive barrier specific post-employment support and adequate funding to assist clients access required support services. After program running costs, PSP providers report being able to allocate a maximum of \$150 per participant per year to meet all support needs and referrals (Perkins 2005).

People Facing Homelessness in the Personal Support Program

Research undertaken by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne Citymission and Hanover provides some insight into the needs and attitudes of PSP participants experiencing homelessness or housing instability. The research involved surveys with 134 PSP participants across metropolitan, regional and rural Victoria, as well as interviews with case managers at 15 providers and Centrelink and DEWR staff.

Data from participant surveys illustrated the high level of disadvantage experienced by PSP participants overall. Around 70% had year 11 or less as their highest level of education, 78% suffered from a mental health problem such as anxiety, depression or a personality disorder and the average length of unemployment before entering PSP was around two and a half years.

Homelessness was a very significant issue amongst those surveyed. Around 50% of the sample had been homeless in the last five years, 35% were reported by case managers to be presently facing homelessness and accommodation/housing

was listed as a required assistance type for one-third of clients surveyed. Clients that had been homeless in the last 5 years reported that unemployment was one of the most common factors contributing to them becoming homeless.

Case managers indicated that inadequate access to housing was an area of particular vulnerability for PSP clients: the problem was sometimes the transient nature of accommodation available rather than homelessness as such. Factors they identified as contributing to homelessness included difficulties in accessing crisis accommodation, high costs of private rental and public housing waiting lists for people without children which were 'so long as to be practically useless'. It was reported that often PSP clients had tried to rent privately, been blacklisted when they fell behind with rent and then been locked out of private rental.

Clients facing homelessness had some differences from PSP clients overall in the other barriers faced (see Table 1.1). In particular, homeless clients had substantially higher levels of drug and alcohol problems and somewhat higher levels of family breakdown. Mental health problems (depression/anxiety/personality disorders), while still affecting over 70% of clients facing homelessness, were slightly less common than amongst other clients.

Participants with mental health issues were reported to have particular difficulties with housing due to the interpersonal aspects of share accommodation being beyond their capacity and frequent moving causing additional stress, loss of belongings and fragmentation of support networks. These people sometimes resort to caravan park cabins which could cost more than three-quarters of their benefits and be of quite a low standard.

Homeless clients with mental health issues were reported to be harder to engage in the program and homelessness was one of 7 barriers (out of the 42 examined) that showed a statistically significant negative relationship with the level of client engagement reported by the case manager.

Most common personal barriers amongst PSP participants overall and those facing homelessness

Barrier	All participants (n=134)	Participants facing homelessness (n=47)
Mental health problems	78%	72%
Family breakdown	66%	76%
Low confidence/self-esteem	65%	61%
Social isolation/alienation	56%	57%
Drug problems	40%	55%
Alcohol problems	31%	49%



Attitudes to Employment

Despite barriers faced, most clients facing homelessness reported having some connection with the labour market in the past two years and a substantial proportion wanted to take part in employment now. However, overall those facing homelessness seemed to be somewhat more disconnected from the labour market than other participants in PSP.

Around 51% of participants facing homelessness had worked in the past two years. However, amongst those who had worked, irregular casual work was around three times more common, and regular casual work twice as common, as part-time and full-time work, indicating that most employment was in jobs that offered little stability of tenure or income and were also be likely to provide little opportunity for skill development or advancement.

Around 29% of participants facing homelessness indicated that work (23% full-time, 6% part-time/casual) was the activity they would most like to be doing now and 26% indicated that they were very ready or close to very ready to work now. A further 36% indicated that study or training was the activity they would most like to be doing now.

However, for those moving back to work, intensive support to stay in the workforce does appear to be crucial: 93% of clients

facing homelessness indicated that they would like to stay on PSP after gaining work or starting their other chosen activity.

At the other end of the scale, 45% of those facing homelessness felt quite unready to work. Case managers reported that it was very difficult for people to focus on looking for work when they were struggling to find secure affordable accommodation and did not know where they would be living from one week to the next. The situation is somewhat of a catch-22: the lack of stability and stress caused by their homelessness made it difficult to look for work, but the lack of income from work made it difficult to access stable housing.

A More Integrated Approach

The PSP is an important program providing holistic support to job seekers facing multiple personal issues. The program provides people facing homeless with integrated support to address other issues such as mental health problems, family breakdown, and substance abuse. However, the low funding levels and lack of employment assistance within the program both significantly hinder its effectiveness.

The strong connection between unemployment and homelessness combined with the large diversity in desire to work and self-perceived readiness for work amongst PSP participants highlights

the importance of having a system that can better address both these needs in an integrated way appropriate to the individual. A PSP case manager put this as follows:

The current system appears designed to give people periods of 'time out', during which they can be assisted to address issues relating to their personal welfare and are given a break from demanding requirements to ensure they are focused on getting a job. The PSP is one of these options. Nevertheless, it would seem preferable to have a system that enabled people to have their health and welfare considered throughout the process of assisting them to get work, rather than having a one or the other approach.

A more integrated approach would need to provide support for people facing homelessness in PSP to move into employment or education and training while also receiving the intensive personal support they require to manage other issues such as housing instability and mental health problems. Employment support would need to assist people into decent jobs providing some level of financial and employment stability as well as extended post-placement personal support. ■

Perkins, D 2005, *Personal Support Program evaluation: Interim report*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy.