THE HIV, HOUSING & EMPLOYMENT PROJECT

POWER Job Club

Learn how Liberty Community Services, Inc. successfully integrated employment into their existing services through an innovative intervention called POWER (Pursuing Opportunities with Employment & Resources).

SUMMARY

This spotlight profiles the implementation of the POWER (Pursuing Opportunities With Employment & Resources) project at Liberty Community Services, Inc. in New Haven, Connecticut. The POWER project is a component of Project HERO (Housing and Employment Resources for Improving HIV Outcomes), which, in partnership with Yale University, is funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, HIV/AIDS Bureau, Ryan White HIV/ AIDS Program Part F, Special Projects of National Significance. The goal of Project HERO is to improve HIV outcomes through an established patient-centered medical home by linking people living with HIV who are unstably housed to HIV care, housing, and employment services.

Job clubs encourage peer support to prepare for work and expand participants' networks.[1] POWER expands upon the job club promising practice, using the concept of an Employment Spectrum. The Employment Spectrum recognizes that obtaining work is not a linear path but an individual process that focuses on a person's readiness to learn new skills and build networks and resources. Over an 8-week period, POWER brings people together for 16 sessions to explore their strengths, learn about education & training options, build self-esteem, and make progress on the Employment Spectrum. Among the 42 POWER participants 6 cycles, 71% of enrollees progressed on the Employment Spectrum.

[1]US Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, Starting a Job Club, https://h1bskillstraining.workforcegps.org/resources/2016/05/18/11/53/Resource

WHY THIS SPOTLIGHT?

Employment and economic self-sufficiency play a key role in health. With the effectiveness of early antiretroviral treatment (ART), many people with HIV (PWH) can (and do) participate in the country's workforce. When community-based organizations, HIV/AIDS service organizations (ASOs), and health care centers provide employment services to their clients, a thoughtful approach is required to address the potential barriers to employment on the individual, organizational, and structural levels. POWER is an innovative intervention developed in New Haven, CT, based on the job club model. It seeks to bridge the gap between barriers and employment through peer support and community partnerships to prepare participants for success.

CONTRIBUTORS

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A successful POWER program requires thoughtful staff

▶ Staff must engage genuinely with participants, follow-up with participants, and offer one-on-one check-ins if needed. Staff should continuously identify and build partnerships with existing community services. Partnerships strengthen the system of services between agencies in your community and broadens community relations for participants.

Location, Location, Location

▶ Program location is an important element of success to reach persons who are unstably housed. Find a warm, welcoming, central location close to public transportation or downtown areas. Think about access and comfort for your population. The Liberty Community Services space was designed by a trauma-informed social worker taking colors, pictures, furniture, and atmosphere into account.

Introduce the Employment Spectrum

▶ The word *employment* may bring up resistance and fear. Meet participants where they are by introducing them to progressive options, like education, volunteerism, financial empowerment, training, and skills building. POWER builds self-awareness and self-confidence through exposure to people, places, and things.

Have Tangible Reinforcements For Engagement

▶ Meet participants basic needs first. POWER helps provide food, bus passes, clothing for work, and hygiene kits. POWER also provides calendars, pens, notebooks, and folders in the early sessions. Snacks are offered at every meeting. Staff offer consistent support with texts or phone call reminders every week.

Prioritize Consumer-Driven Programming

▶ Evaluate what works for participants and what can improve. POWER prioritizes time to collect anonymous consumer feedback at two points in a cycle. This requires a willingness to make curriculum changes based on what staff learn. For example, past POWER participants found the program so valuable they requested adding a weekly graduate-led group. Adding graduate-led groups can teach leadership skills, build community, and empower participants.
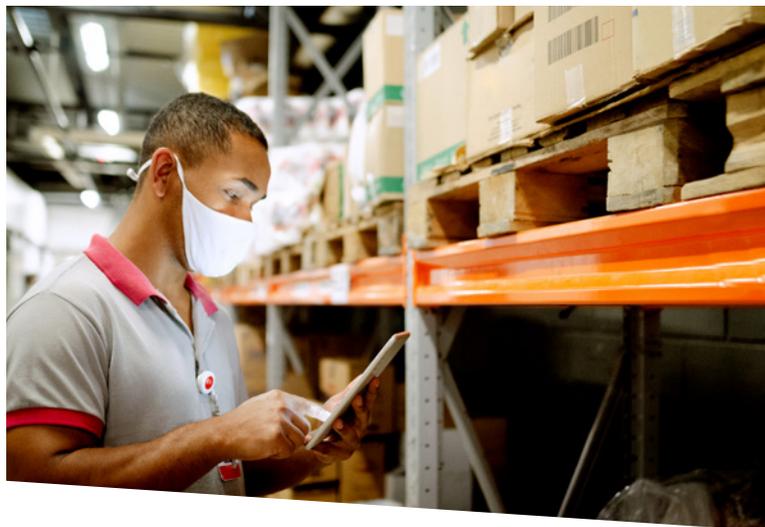
CHALLENGE

Employment is associated with improved HIV health outcomes, notably testing, linkage to care, and adherence to medication.[2] However, one previous study found that only approximately 12% of people with HIV who are unstably housed have access to some type of employment.[3] Challenges to becoming employed include a fear of potential reduction of benefits, such as housing and food subsidies, and health insurance. Systemic challenges include legal concerns, limited work histories, lack of transportation, and lack of necessities like work-appropriate attire, food, and housing. Furthermore, an often-immobilizing combination of concerns such as anticipated stigma, fear of discrimination, fear of failure, and fear of the unknown are all essential demotivating factors to address. Addressing these multi-faceted challenges requires a holistic approach targeting the specific needs of your community.

Traditional employment programming is often linear and not trauma-informed. Thus is not responsive to the widespread impact of trauma on how participants perceive themselves or how they process information. A trauma-informed approach to employment support and care must emphasize safety, transparency, collaboration, empowerment, choice, and intersectionality.[4] A trauma-informed approach in assessing work histories is needed

[2]Maulsby, C. H., Ratnayake, A., Hesson, D., Mugavero, M. J., & Latkin, C. A. (2020). A Scoping Review of Employment and HIV. AIDS and behavior.

[3]Rajabiun, S., Tryon, J., Feaster, M., Pan, A., McKeithan, L., Fortu, K., … & Altice, F. L. (2018). The influence of housing status on the HIV continuum of care: results from a multisite study of patient navigation models to build a medical home for people living with HIV experiencing homelessness. American Journal of Public Health, 108(S7), S539-S545.

[4]Bowen, E., & Shaanta Murshid, N. (2016) Trauma-Informed Social Policy: A Conceptual Framework for Policy Analysis and Advocacy. American Journal of Public Health 106, 223_229, https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302970

> "I was very grateful for the opportunity to be a part of this class. It has increased my self-esteem through the major support I received. I will be present if they have any further info classes. I loved it, would recommend to others."
>
> – POWER Client
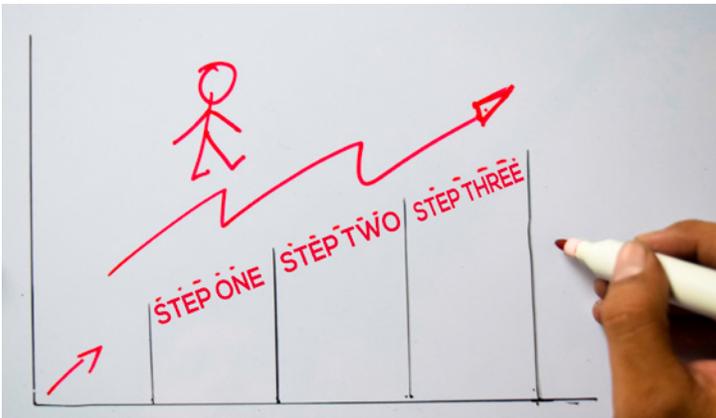
Understanding the Employment Spectrum:

▶ Workforce engagement is not a linear process.

▶ People start where they are ready to start.

▶ Progress is any step toward self-development or employment

▶ Progress requires learning, demystification of misconceptions, networking, volunteerism, and trying new things.

as the participants' histories are often wrought with oppression, poverty, abuse, shame, and instability on all fronts. Traditional programs may not offer sustained follow-up associated with processing the effects of trauma and re-entering the workforce.

The traditional framework may not meet the needs of people with HIV who are homeless, have recently exited incarceration, have criminal histories, are experiencing stigma, have undocumented status, or are beginning to explore returning to work after receiving social security disability insurance. For these populations, especially, employment programming should approach employment as a spectrum, focusing on personal goals and progressive skills building. For example, an individual's end goal may not be full-time employment, but rather part-time to supplement disability. Anywhere an individual falls on the Employment Spectrum is valued. The goal is to try something new and get participants back on their feet.

Sample Curriculum Outline

Week 1: Introductions, Guidelines, Expectations

Week 2: Resume Building

Week 3: Entrepreneurship and banking

Week 4: Volunteering

Week 5: Disability and Health

Week 6: Education and Personal Development

Week 7: Employment

Week 8: Presentation & First Impressions

Week 9: Reflections and Follow-up

STRATEGY/ACTIVITIES

POWER is an example of operationalizing the Employment Spectrum framework. In POWER, job seekers have an opportunity to share job leads and experiences with employers during group sessions. In addition to networking, POWER partners with representatives from the community to offer a structured presentation and meeting schedule, where participants can learn skills in areas such as resume building, workplace culture, and computer competencies. They gain empowering knowledge about disability benefits and labor laws and connect with local resources such as GED programs and banks. They network with one another and the presenters who may play a role in their progress on the Employment Spectrum. The ultimate goal is often securing employment. Yet, in the process, participants gain confidence by adhering to the meeting schedule, learning to dress for success, and clarifying their misconceptions about benefits and work expectations.

How Does POWER Run?

POWER meets twice a week for 8 cycles (16 sessions) in Liberty Community Service's central community space. In addition to the curriculum, a week is dedicated to administering scales to measure POWER's impact on self-esteem, self-care, and self-efficacy. Sessions are organized and co-led by an Employment & Income Navigator. On average, there are 10-12 participants per cycle. To support sustained engagement, POWER helps provide food, bus passes, clothing for work, and hygiene kits to participants.

The curriculum can adjust to meet participants' needs in each cycle and covers topics such as group expectations, resume building, volunteering, personal development, banking and personal finance skills, disability and health, first impressions, understanding benefits, and employment resources. The Employment & Income Navigator identifies content experts in the community and matches them with each of the POWER modules. Examples of community resources are financial empowerment specialists, community banks, local cosmetology schools, education and vocational training programs, and volunteer organizations. At the end of the 8-week cycle, a graduation is held to celebrate the participants' success!

A champion for the participant, such as an HIV or housing case manager, refers clients to POWER via a referral form that collects demographics and contact information, as well as an observed strength. This begins the process of looking at the person through a strengths-based lens. Some examples of strengths-

POWER graduate bringing his pets to the POWER space

POWER Benefited From These Partnerships

Banks &Financial Literacy Groups

▶ Provide free checking account programs

Libraries

▶ Provide computer access/support and volunteer opportunities

Legal & Justice Involvement Programs

▶ Provide help with record expungement, understanding the CORI process, and identifying jobs that hire clients with criminal histories

Local Cosmetology Schools

▶ Provide free haircuts and grooming

Senior Living Facilities and Hospitals

▶ Provide volunteer programing opportunities

Community Colleges & Trade Schools, and Adult Education Centers

▶ Provide educational and training opportunities

Community Health Vans

▶ Provide connection to healthcare and screenings

Employment Programs

▶ Provide connections to American Job Centers, and the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services

based observations are: they are always on time, they ask good questions and take notes, or they are committed to recovery and care deeply about others.

Ongoing participant feedback is built into the program, beginning with the referral process, continuing at the midpoint, and occurring again at the end of the cycle. Examples of feedback that have helped shape the curriculum include the need for additional support for those with criminal justice involvement, such as learning about record expungement. Input from participants also resulted in a changed schedule and in-house resume building support rather than meeting with a community partner.

POWER participants also requested a "graduate-led" support group. "Graduates" are those who have completed the 16-session cycle. Graduate groups meet once a week, enabling graduates who are either not yet fully employed or have time and want to engage with community, exchange knowledge, and hear about new jobs. Graduates also help speak to the new cycle of participants to encourage them and share support. This promotes graduate leadership development, problem-solving skills, and community connection.

How Do I Start a POWER Program?

Identify a strong leader to coordinate the program. POWER should be a vital part of an employee's job description and an official function of the position. About 20% FTE is needed to organize the program, lead sessions, and follow-up with participants. An employee with experience in the community and knowledge of the population will better understand the participants' experience, including what resources best address common barriers. Social Services are all about relationships and a service mindset. A leader must be non-judgmental, listen and apply learning, build human connections and trust, be authentic and sincere, and network with the community to build partnerships. Staff must understand not to bring personal goals and expectations to the clients but meet the clients where they are.

Start assessing the specific needs and resources in your community and organization. Ask, "Who else is doing employment work in this community?" Conduct a community resource assessment of mainstream and population-specific employment programs.

POWER Participant Employment Spectrum Outcomes	
Secured Paid Employment	60%
Joined a Volunteering Program	11%
Enrolled in Education /Training	7%

Compile resources in one document and disseminate to providers in your community. Ask case managers/ care coordinators, "Do the people you serve have jobs? Do they say they want to work?" "Are you familiar with local employment programs?" "Do you know how to apply for services?" The employment resource document answers those questions. The intent is to build interest in the POWER model, build community connections, and facilitate referrals.

Community buy-in and creative partnerships are critical. Utilize networking connections from past work and contact new potential partners from your needs assessment and community scan. Organizing or drawing from community coalition meetings to share resources and promote employment and training opportunities can be beneficial. Partner with your local Department of Labor American Job Centers to organize a more targeted small-group presentation to explain their system and programs and answer SSI/SSDI questions. This creates a warm hand-off to further services.

As content experts are contacted to lead a topic module, help them identify the mutual benefit of involvement. For instance, the financial empowerment specialist is funded to provide services to this population, and by leading a POWER session, they can fulfill their recruitment goals. Community colleges are always seeking enrollees. Volunteer organizations need volunteers, and banks need customers. Talk to your local chamber of commerce to promote that building a relationship with the clients is beneficial for the community. For Liberty Community Services Inc., buy-in was easy with these partners, even without a stipend. These partnerships increased participant community engagement, empowerment, and access to resources.

Preparing to launch your first cycle of POWER may take roughly four weeks. Reserve at least two weeks for curriculum building and two weeks to recruit clients. Once you begin a cycle of POWER, commit to continuous participant-driven quality improvement, survey clients for feedback at the mid-point of each cycle, and incorporate their needs. Between each cycle, check-in with participants and partners for continuous quality improvement. The curriculum should be dynamic and flexible, preparing each cycle of job seekers for effective job searches. Preparation time needed between each cycle is minimal, as you have established relationships and rolling referrals.

"POWER opened doors for me by getting me back into the workforce. I am comfortable with interviews now. The information is really helpful. Information about school, housing, food, furniture, bus passes—an all-around great help. I would refer this to anyone who is having a homeless situation. It is one of the most horrible situations. The doors this has opened for me are astronomical."
– POWER Client

OUTCOMES

POWER has had a positive impact on Liberty Community Services, Inc. clients. Generally, there was a high degree of participant satisfaction, a participant desire to continue after the cycle of 16 sessions (graduate group), an increased participant awareness of the community resources, and a decreased sense of isolation. Overall employment outcomes also improved at the agency, with 71% of enrollees progressing on the Employment Spectrum, 60% of enrollees securing paid employment, 7% entering school/training, and 11% starting volunteerism. All participants also reported an increase in self-care and physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual domains.

NEXT STEPS

Liberty Community Services, Inc. continues to run POWER successfully, even expanding to include participants from a broader range of programs and organizations. Liberty Community Services, Inc. has shared this promising practice through various national conferences. They are now working on national scalability opportunities for further replication of POWER.

POWER In a Pandemic

In response to the public health emergency resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, Liberty Community Services, Inc. has adjusted its approach in order to continue serving clients. During the COVID-19 pandemic, sessions are held in a larger location, in the downtown library, which allows for safe social distancing. Community partners speak to participants through Zoom calls to reduce contact and exposure for everyone. Hand sanitizer, masks, wipes, and extra pens are provided to help protect participants. Providing POWER through purely virtual means did not work for this population as access to WIFI and computers is a barrier. Gathering socially while maintaining safe physical distancing is beneficial for this community and encourages peer support. POWER continues to generate positive outcomes during this public health emergency.

Further information about this project and others like it can be found on *Target HIV.* Here you can find related policy briefs, implementation manuals, and client stories.