

HUD EMPLOYMENT LECTURE SERIES
Lecture #1 Script
INTEGRATING VOCATIONAL ASSESSMENT IN
CLIENT SERVICE PLANNING

Section 1 Introduction to HUD Employment Lecture Series #1 “Integrating Vocational Assessment in Client Service Planning”

Colleagues:

This lecture is the first in a series of nine lectures that are being developed on employment-related topics. To order or download lectures from this series, please go to www.hudhre.info.

Today’s topic is integrating vocational assessments in client service planning.

This lecture is intended for outreach workers and case managers working in homeless programs and community rehabilitation programs.

We will talk primarily about serving homeless single adults. You may, however, also find the information contained in this lecture and pamphlet useful if you are helping clients other than homeless single adults, such as youth and families.

The vocational assessment principles and practices discussed in this lecture are derived from information gathered through both research and conversations with a number of practitioners working throughout the country. These included:

- Outreach workers;
- Homeless shelter staff;
- McKinney-Vento housing case managers;
- Employment program staff; and
- Staff selected from One-Stop Career Centers including State vocational rehabilitation staff.

All of these practitioners we spoke with are familiar with coordinating vocational assessments with people who are homeless.

Accompanying this lecture is a pamphlet that provides additional information including a list of resources and examples of vocational assessment practices.

This lecture has 12 sections. The topics contained in the remaining eleven sections are as follows:

- Section 2: Why Conduct Vocational Assessments?
- Section 3: Challenges in the Assessment of People Who Are Homeless
- Section 4: When to Start the Vocational Assessment
- Section 5: Informal Vocational Assessments
- Section 6: Informal Vocational Assessment Strategies

- Section 7: Vocational Assessment Tools and Techniques
- Section 8: Tips on Developing Vocational Assessments
- Section 9: Things to Be Aware of in Vocational Assessments for People Who Are Homeless
- Section 10: Being Informed About and Linking to Mainstream Services
- Section 11: A Case Scenario; and
- Section 12: Conclusion

Section 2 Why Conduct Vocational Assessments?

Let's start by discussing why it's important to conduct vocational assessments.

In your daily work, you might conduct assessments of clients' physical health, motivation to participate in mental health or substance abuse treatment, and willingness or ability to obtain or keep their housing, but you might not include a vocational assessment.

Thinking about employment as part of the recovery process will help your clients prepare for employment or other purposeful activity.

Including a vocational assessment as part of what you do will achieve two primary objectives.

- First, you will obtain information that will help employment staff or case managers place and support clients in employment.
- Second, you will more quickly identify clients who want to work, have work experience, or already work at some activity that brings them money.

Helping clients identify employment barriers and strengths through a vocational assessment should be part of the first steps in helping them get a job and obtain a steady source of income that can help them avoid future homelessness.

Furthermore, when clients ask for a job, you need to be able to respond quickly with services that help them get a job. An initial vocational assessment, early in the process, with follow-up done on an ongoing basis, is a critical part of this process.

We know that helping people think about work and being supportive can be powerful tools in addressing homelessness. As you work with clients to identify issues and barriers, it may be difficult for them to understand and accept limitations. The conversation that occurs as part of the vocational assessment can be a real opportunity for self-discovery and trust-building.

Section 3 Challenges in the Assessment of People Who Are Homeless

What might be some of the challenges in conducting vocational assessments?

As you start to conduct vocational assessment activities, or if you are refining or expanding existing activities, it is important to keep in mind the hurdles that you will need to overcome.

When considering the needs of your clients, a primary consideration should be the personal challenges faced by people who are homeless. These challenges can affect

vocational services, your ability to conduct a vocational assessment, and eventual job performance.

- A high percentage of people who are homeless have one or more disabilities, including substance abuse, mental illness, or physical disabilities. The disabilities and symptoms could also affect the person's ability to participate in an assessment as well as the quality of the information obtained. These can be especially challenging when not fully resolved.
- In addition, past job failures and the fear of failing again may increase the difficulty of extracting useful information about a person's vocational goals, strengths, and their skills.

Conducting a comprehensive vocational assessment can take a lot of time, particularly when helping people who are facing the challenges that were just described. Vocational assessment is a continuous, ongoing process that is informed and strengthened by trust, experience, understanding, and insight. It is also important for practitioners to have some knowledge about the needs and expectations of employers.

Section 4 When to Start the Vocational Assessment

So, where do you begin when you want to start talking about employment to people who are homeless?

Vocational assessments begin at different points for different individuals.

Discussion with a stranger is awkward and uncomfortable for many people who are homeless. With some people, the vocational assessment process begins with street outreach. Developing a trusting relationship with a person living on the street begins by offering something "with no strings attached." Many people who are homeless think that there are a number of hoops that they must jump through before employment can be considered. Therefore, engaging individuals in a conversation about work with "no strings attached" can be attractive to them.

In addition, as outreach workers hand out food, tokens, and blankets, they could also start talking to individuals about employment. Normally, after a few months of speaking with the same outreach workers about employment, the client may feel comfortable enough to come into the office to get more employment information. That may lead to getting help with employment and arranging a meeting with an employment specialist to explore what types of jobs he or she wants and what employment skills and experience the individual has.

Practitioners we contacted during the development of this lecture approach the issue of vocational assessment in a number of ways.

- One program manager said that all of their case managers conduct a total assessment of a person's housing and support needs. This assessment might also include basic information about employment. Only after the client expresses an interest in employment will a more extensive vocational assessment be given.
- Another provider said that everyone gets a comprehensive vocational assessment when they enter the program.
- A third provider said that they conduct one-on-one vocational assessments as part of their informal conversations instead of using a set of forms to fill out. As a

result, they have found that conversations with clients are more individualized, and the practitioner receives more accurate responses.

Think about when vocational assessments are offered or could be offered at your agency to people who are homeless. Given the structure of your program, when would be the best time to introduce vocational assessment?

Section 5 Informal Vocational Assessments

The timing of vocational assessment goes hand-in-hand with the format you will use. Vocational assessments are being offered in a variety of formats, informal and formal.

Let's briefly discuss informal vocational assessments.

A vocational assessment should look at the type of job a person wants, the expected income, and how employment will affect their benefits. You can start by gathering a significant amount of information through informal conversation with your clients.

- As you talk with your clients, you will want to find out:
 - What they think they want to do, especially at this time in their life;
 - What they think they are good at;
 - When they want to start working;
 - How much money they need to earn; and
 - If they have any physical or other limitations that might affect their work.
- On a practical level, you can ask a person what he or she would need in order to go to work at this time. Examples of items a person might need in order to go to work include:
 - Transportation and food money;
 - Special clothes or special shoes; or
 - Special tools; or
 - A current identification.
- To find out what kind of support your clients have, you could ask them who is helpful to them and who they can trust.
- You also want to ask and document information about the person's work history. Examples of information related to a person's work history include whether they have a resume, their level of education, their experiences, their work patterns and skills, and how their skills could be valuable to an employer. Most homeless people have worked in the past. You might ask them to tell you a little bit about a job they liked or one they did not like.

As you engage them in conversation keep several things in mind.

- First, the responses that you get during any assessment are affected by mental health, distress, physical health or fear, and other factors. So, be prepared to revisit these questions throughout the time your agency assists the client and recognize that their interest in a job can change over time.

- Second, people may not be honest about what their true job readiness is. They may not be entirely forthcoming about their past or current conditions. Some individuals are unable to express their job readiness themselves.
- Finally, most people who have been or are homeless have low self-esteem and low self-confidence because they have been put in situations where they have not had control. It is important to put them into situations where they feel successful and confident and can begin to understand that they have real skills and talents.

As a case manager, it is likely that you may also play a role in helping your clients access public benefits. It is a very logical time for you or your clients to ask about the impact that earning wages might have on applying for or retaining benefits. The vocational assessment should gather information about the types of public assistance benefits the client receives or may be entitled to, because earning income from a wage can potentially affect a person's housing subsidy, their cash payments, their medical insurance, and other sources of support.

Your area's Social Security Administration Office can help you advise your clients regarding the impact of work on benefits and work-related subsidies. In many communities, there is a Social Security Expert who can help people with disabilities plan their benefits and return to work.

- These sometimes are located at social services agencies, a One-Stop Career Center, or an Independent Living Center, that is operating under contract to the Social Security Administration.
- You should have a copy of the Social Security Administration's *Red Book*, which contains definitions of benefits and planning. You can refer to this resource in your discussions with your clients. The *Red Book* is available through the World Wide Web at www.ssa.gov.

Discussion about benefits can serve as a good lead-in to developing a financial plan. A financial plan includes exploring what the client could pay for rent, food, clothes, and other daily living needs and how much money the client needs to earn to meet these expenses.

Remember, trust-building is important to gathering valid vocational assessment information. The clients are the experts of their own life. If they say they are disabled and want to apply for benefits, then it is a case manager's job to help them apply for and attempt to receive Supplemental Security Income or Social Security Disability Insurance. A realistic assessment of the likelihood of the receipt of benefits can be in the client's best interest. Waiting for benefits that are not going to come can be detrimental. It is important to remind them that they will always be better off financially by working at a good wage-paying job with health benefits rather than living on public assistance.

Section 6 Informal Vocational Assessment Strategies

Now, we would like to talk about specific strategies for informal vocational assessments by thinking about where they can take place.

- For example, if you meet people who are homeless at food pantries, you may want to ask them if they would want to talk with an employment specialist when they return for their next food pick up. You could arrange to have an employment

specialist be there on the next food distribution day to talk with anyone interested in a job and to gather vocational information that could start the process.

- You can also meet people who are homeless outside the food pantry and talk with them about their vocational skills, aptitudes, and interests. With a client's agreement, you can then pass on your notes to an employment specialist.
- If your community operates a drop-in center, an employment specialist can visit there on a regular schedule.
- It also helps to emphasize employment in familiar environments, like drop-in centers, by putting up job postings and information about getting a job.

Although your role in your organization may not be to conduct vocational assessments, your familiarity and knowledge of the client provides you with an opportunity to arrange the meeting space and time of a vocational assessment, remind clients of the events, and, of course, follow up.

So think about people who are interested in going to work and how you and your community can connect them to employment specialists who can help.

Section 7 Vocational Assessment Tools and Techniques

As mentioned earlier, vocational assessments can be offered in a variety of formats. We have discussed the information that you can gather with an informal assessment and the settings where people who are homeless might be more comfortable having these discussions.

Now, we will talk about tools and techniques that can be used when conducting more formal vocational assessments. Formal assessments include questions that attempt to uncover what the client can and cannot do, what they like and what they don't like, in order to set an employment goal that is both realistic and of the client's choosing.

You can refer to the pamphlet that compliments this recording for an example of an initial vocational assessment interview tool.

In conjunction with the interview, you can also administer a written vocational assessment with an individual to help uncover potential literacy problems. For example, if a person is having trouble comprehending the forms, it could signal the need for a cognitive or literacy remediation. If this need is identified and the client agrees, the case manager could read the questions, and the client can answer the questions in writing or verbally.

Another tool you can use is a "situational assessment." During a situational assessment, you would observe and evaluate job behaviors and attitudes over time. This would occur in an actual or in a simulated work setting. This tool assesses how the client performs while actually completing the work tasks.

As you look around your agency at the variety of jobs people do, you could seek opportunities to use those work environments as potential situational assessment opportunities. Your client, working under the general supervision of a staff member or a volunteer and with your support, could spend just an hour a day in a number of different work situations, during which you could test and assess their skills, abilities, and interests. The advantage of the situational assessment is that staff can observe not only skills and aptitudes, but also how well the person interacts with co-workers. The

disadvantage is that people perform differently in different work environments, and successes or challenges in one environment may not be predictive for another.

A third tool you could consider using is “Career Mapping,” which was developed by a program in Portland, Oregon. Career Mapping is an interactive exercise through which clients and case managers identify or ‘map out’ information about such things as their life history, their vocational strengths, gifts, and capacities. Each participant uses paper and colored markers to create so-called maps. This can also be done in both written and pictorial form. The process reveals concrete strategies for addressing barriers to employment. All of the information is used to develop a vocational plan that accounts for the person’s strengths and their skills. The accompanying pamphlet contains more information about how you can use the Career Mapping process in your own program.

Finally, a vocational assessment method introduced by the U.S. Department of Labor is now being used with people who are chronically homeless. This method called, “Customized Employment Discovery,” offers the following four tips:

- First, create a connection with the client during the assessment interview by demonstrating understanding, reflecting emotion, asking open-ended questions, disclosing appropriate information, and observing current capacities.
- Second, look at both endearing and annoying personality traits to find out how the client may use or manage them in a work environment.
- Third, review the person’s daily routines and identify characteristics that could affect work. One example of such a characteristic is being an early morning person or a person who likes to be active late in the evenings.
- Lastly, record the person’s goals and aspirations and ask how others might evaluate and provide support for those goals.

Vocational assessments, whether completed on paper or through observation, begin with the premise that anyone who wants to work is employable at some type of job. Using formal assessment instruments in conjunction with situational, work-based assessments to gather information will lead to a more balanced vocational profile and will aid you in helping your client find employment. Remember that evaluating or assessing vocational skills is intended to “screen in,” not “screen out.”

Section 8 Tips on Developing Vocational Assessments

Here are a few tips for developing vocational assessments. These tips address the questions you might consider as you open the discussion of employment and, later, as you gather information that can be used to develop an employment plan. In the accompanying written material you will find additional information for developing and conducting vocational assessments.

In developing a vocational assessment tool, consider questions that will help your client think about the meaning that work has in their everyday life. For example, you may ask any of the following three questions:

- First, “What do you need to do every day to prepare for the work you’re doing now?”
- Second, “Where do you need to be and at what time?”

- Third, “Who are your best customers and why?”

When asking these kinds of questions, keep in mind that the work they are doing may include collecting bottles, day labor, or panhandling. You may need to help your client understand that these activities are work. As you further define the content of your vocational assessment tools, consider how the information that you will gather can be used to develop an employment plan. The types of information needed to develop an effective employment plan have been grouped into seven categories.

- First, information about your client’s work history. You can ask questions like, “Have you ever worked before and if so, what did you like about your job, and what was difficult about your job?”
- Second, any technical skills that your client possesses. You could start by asking, “Do you participate in day labor or temp jobs, and what skills do you use on those jobs?”
- Third, your client’s immediate job goal. You can ask, “What do you see yourself working at next week at this time or a year from today?”
- Fourth, skills, attitudes, and experiences your client needs to be able to obtain his or her short and long term job goals.
- Fifth, information about the types of services your client has accessed in the past. You want to know how he or she accessed services, food, shelter, and employment in the past. Additionally, you can find out which support systems your client knows about and which ones he or she has used successfully. You can also find out where and how your client has received encouragement and discouragement when seeking work or thinking about it in the past.
- Sixth, your client’s financial status. You need to find out what kind of immediate needs he or she has and how getting a job can help meet those needs.
- Lastly, your client’s employment support network. For example, you want to know which persons are depended on now who can also help your client get and keep a job. These people can eventually be part of your client’s support team.

Remember that as you gather information during your conversations, you will also want to assess your client’s ability to be on time and on task. These conversations provide opportunities for you to point out that he or she may already be doing this, and that these abilities are an important part of the vocational assessment and eventual success of the job.

Section 9 Things to Be Aware of in Vocational Assessments for People Who Are Homeless

As you start to conduct vocational assessments and incorporate the assessments into your program, there are several things to keep in mind.

First, at the initial contact, offer people who are homeless the commitment of more support for their employment efforts. Because most of their previous attempts have been without support, it is easy to see why people may say “I tried and failed. I can’t do it.” After you offer people more support, then you want to make sure to follow through.

Second, a big mistake many practitioners make is to use vocational assessments early in the process, but without a plan for updating the information and conducting new assessments as time goes on. Likewise, vocational assessments do not end when the

client obtains job placement. The assessment should be ongoing and keep pace with a person's personal and vocational growth.

Third, vocational assessments should consider client demographics, culture, ethnic, and language differences that affect a person's orientation to work. Assessments should capture group differences in the expression of job readiness, adaptation, and wellness. Periodically, you should re-evaluate program goals to ensure cultural competence and client satisfaction. The pamphlet lists a number of cultural competence principles for developing or conducting vocational assessments.

Section 10 Being Informed About and Linking to Mainstream Workforce Services

Up until now the focus has been on developing, incorporating, and conducting vocational assessments. But throughout this process, it is important to be informed about and link to mainstream services.

- McKinney-Vento programs may work with the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation in their State, which provides funding for vocational assessments. Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, or DVR, is one of the primary employment resources available to people with disabilities. DVR counselors help job-seekers develop their individual employment plan and provide the appropriate support services to choose, obtain, and maintain employment.
- Job-seekers, with and without disabilities, often use the services of the U.S. Department of Labor-funded One-Stop Career Centers to help them obtain jobs. One-Stop Career Centers, or One Stops, were authorized under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. They are intended to provide both job-seekers and employers with a range of training and placement services and are open to anyone in the community looking for work. One-Stop staff often uses written vocational assessments to try to match job seekers with employer needs.
- Case managers need to know the vocational assessment, training, and job placement resources that One-Stops offer. To understand how these services can help people who are homeless, case managers should develop a contact at a One-Stop that they can communicate and work with. If the One-Stop has a Disability Program Navigator, that person may be the likely contact. Otherwise, visit the One-Stop and talk with the director about services you offer that can help people who are homeless better use One-Stop resources. Because State DVR agencies are mandated One-Stop partners, DVR staff may be able to help introduce you and begin the connection.
- Employers use vocational assessments and work credentials when hiring workers. For example, a National Work Readiness Credential is currently being piloted in a number of States with the support of the Departments of Labor and Education, as well as business leaders. The Credential assesses nine skills required to perform 36 entry-level work tasks. Passing the assessment means a person can perform these tasks and behaviors identified in the Credential. Many One-Stops may offer job-seekers a chance to take the test and obtain the credential with the expectation that employers will look favorably upon job candidates who are credentialed. More information on the National Work Readiness Credential can be found at their Web site: www.workreadiness.com.

You may also want to contact your local Office of Vocational Rehabilitation to get copies of the vocational assessment forms that they use so that you can reference them when you look at vocational assessment criteria for your clients.

Another option you could consider is partnering with other agencies working with the homeless that have good vocational assessment tools and staff that are trained in those techniques.

Evidence shows that the best method for developing employment readiness is to get people who are homeless into jobs as quickly as possible by accessing mainstream resources that will facilitate job placement.

Section 11 Case Scenario

Let's examine a real-life situation where conducting a good vocational assessment resulted in a positive employment outcome.

David is a 35 year old man who had been homeless for five years. During the past two years, he has developed trust and rapport with Nancy, a case manager at a Shelter plus Care program.

Nancy was the person who helped David move from the streets into an apartment of his own. While helping him get the place he wanted, she also made sure each conversation included something about working.

By the time David was enrolled in the Shelter plus Care program, Nancy had a number of notes and observations about David's work history, his aspirations, work limitations, skills, and people he could rely on for vocational support. These documented responses were the foundation for a more formal vocational assessment to come.

In team meetings, Nancy made a point of including this vocational information and making sure the employment specialist would be prepared for the referral to the employment program when David felt he was ready.

Nancy asked David if he would like to meet with the employment specialist to get help getting a job. David said he wasn't good in classrooms for training, but thought he would like a job as a carpenter.

Nancy arranged for a three-way meeting with David and the employment specialist. At that meeting they reviewed Nancy's notes and observations about David's work interests and his skills.

David eventually agreed to a situational assessment for two weeks working alongside one of the agency's maintenance staff replacing some drywall in the building. Twice a week, he met with the employment specialist and participated in an employment assessment. He discussed how the carpenter situational assessment was going and what he thought he did well.

Nancy was also a part of the process because she reviewed the vocational assessment information and supported David in follow-up conversations.

At the end of the two week combined situational and formal assessment, David developed an employment goal, support strategy, a job development plan, and a retention plan to hold onto his job once he got it.

Three weeks later, David got a part-time job working as a construction worker apprentice making \$12.00 per hour. Even though he began to rely more and more upon his

employment specialist who helped him get and keep his job, Nancy was always in the information loop and available to help David manage his housing, recovery, and his job retention.

Section 12 Conclusion

McKinney-Vento case managers have an important role to play in helping people who are homeless obtain employment, beginning with the vocational assessment process.

As a member of an integrated services team, you can gather important vocational information and help update that information in partnership with employment specialists and clients, making the transition from homelessness to a home and a job of their own.

Remember that you are there to guide, facilitate, motivate, and provide opportunities. But ultimately, your client is in the driver's seat and should own the vocational process.

Although we know that helping people who are homeless get and keep a job is a formidable challenge, we also know from experience that people can and do succeed.

We hope that the information you received in this lecture, along with the pamphlet prepares you to help your clients leave homelessness for a home and a job.