

# CASE STUDY

# LIFEWORKS

*Implementing the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model boosts employment outcomes for transition-age youth facing barriers to employment.*

LifeWorks is a non-profit organization serving transition-age youth and their families in Austin, TX and surrounding areas. Founded in 1998, LifeWorks provides a continuum of services to youth including housing, counseling, education, and workforce services.

## DATA DRIVING CHANGE

In 2014, LifeWorks founder and CEO, Susan McDowell, spearheaded an effort to improve the workforce services offered to LifeWorks youth participants. This effort was sparked by high levels of attrition, lagging employment outcomes, and a recognition that public workforce partnerships were limited in their ability to meet the employment needs of youth facing barriers to employment. An analysis of descriptive characteristics and demographic data of LifeWorks participants revealed extremely high rates of mental health issues, housing instability, and experiences of trauma. Program



administrators realized that workforce models popular within the youth development field may not address the significant and complex challenges faced by their participants. LifeWorks staff began to look toward behavioral health approaches to employment and discovered the Individual Placement & Support model. In addition to its robust evidence base, IPS offered LifeWorks a new approach to workforce support for youth that might better address the types of challenges their participants faced. Dr. Liz Schoenfeld, Director of Research and Evaluation, explains, “Our youth don’t necessarily identify as having serious mental health issues, but many of the same vulnerabilities are there.”

## AN EVIDENCE-BASED EMPLOYMENT MODEL

*The Individual Placement & Support (IPS) model was designed to empower people living with serious mental illness to obtain and maintain meaningful jobs. Rigorous studies of IPS have demonstrated consistent, positive results among people with mental health diagnoses, and preliminary projects have been piloted among a number of different populations including people with criminal records, people with physical disabilities, and people enrolled in public cash assistance programs.*

## SHIFTING APPROACH

Implementing the IPS model required stakeholders throughout LifeWorks to make adjustments to fit the requirements of the model. First was a shift in programmatic focus. Prior to implementing the IPS model Employment Specialists focused on engaging youth in pre-vocational activities including employment assessments, resume development and “soft skills” training before working toward job placement. The IPS model, instead, centers on helping youth find employment right away and subsequent vocational training and career development occurs alongside paid employment. Second, LifeWorks board members and program staff shifted their approach to employer partnerships. Prior to implementing IPS, Employment Specialists relied on a few large employers who agreed to hire LifeWorks youth as a “charitable cause.” These partners were often secured through relationships with board members and managed within the development department. Since implementing IPS, Employment Specialists seek and manage relationships with employers as mutually benefitting partners and emphasize the value of the motivated and supported labor force that LifeWorks provides.

## SUCCESS

Since implementing the IPS model, LifeWorks has been able to place more youth in employment than ever before. Additionally, Employment Specialists have seen an increase in youth engagement in services and employment retention. Employment Specialists have also built a broader network of employer partners from a diverse range of sectors that are better able to meet the varying career interests of jobseekers.

### DURING FY 2017-2018...

...90 youth participated in the IPS model

...youth engaged in services for 9 months on average

...57% were employed at any given point in time

...88% of employed youth were employed for > 30 days

...58% of employed youth were employed for > 90 days

## IPS CORE PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE

The core principles of the IPS model work together to meet the needs of youth facing barriers to employment in a variety of ways.

For example, a **rapid job search** assumes that youth jobseekers are capable of securing employment as they are without being required to complete complicated or time-consuming assessments or classes first. It also communicates an understanding that youth often need and want income urgently. Additionally, ensuring that jobseekers receive **time-unlimited supports** allows Employment Specialists to maintain relationships and offer support for as long as the participant desires. This is particularly significant for youth whose relationships with supportive adults have been inconsistent and unreliable in the past.

An emphasis on **worker preferences** requires Employment Specialists to focus their job development support around the desires and career interests of the jobseeker to the fullest extent possible. In addition, **systematic job development** means that Employment Specialists

### IPS CORE PRINCIPLES

Rapid Job Search  
Systematic Job Development  
Worker Preferences  
Time-Unlimited Supports  
Competitive Employment  
Integrated Services  
Benefits Planning  
Zero Exclusion

From the IPS Employment Center

consistently build and maintain relationships with employers. Taken together, these strategies help youth find jobs that are in line with their interests and long-term career goals. For example, one youth participant May (name changed to preserve confidentiality) told her Employment Specialist, Stephanie, that she loved working with kids and would love to be a teacher someday. Stephanie was able to connect May with Bright Horizons, an organization offering educational services and care for young children. Within a week, May was interviewing for a position at Bright Horizons. Building trusting relationships with hiring managers also allows them to act as mediators when conflicts, misunderstandings, or performance issues arise. Program Director Nick Winowsky explained that youth participants often reach out to their Employment Specialist for guidance and support before making a

decision about how to respond to an issue at work. Likewise, hiring managers and supervisors have requested that Employment Specialists facilitate working through an issue together with the employee. “Employment Specialists have been able to salvage many opportunities that could have been lost, but they were able to turn them into teachable moments,” he explains.

One Employment Specialist summarized the benefits of the IPS model this way: “I have worked [in the workforce field] for many years, and the IPS model is different because it is about getting immersed. It allows me to embrace clients’ specific needs and wants in order to best assist. Additionally, the fact that we get to work with clients for as long as they need is everything. I love it.”

## DO YOU THINK THE IPS MODEL MIGHT WORK FOR JOBSEEKERS IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

- 1 Use data to gain insight into the specific needs of the jobseekers you are seeking to serve.
- 2 If you believe the IPS model would work for the population of jobseekers your organization serves, first build support and buy-in among key stakeholders before implementing it.
- 3 Commit to the model 100% and invest in training and support across the organization in order to ensure that every employee and department understands their role and responsibilities in implementing the new model.
- 4 Share your successes, challenges, and lessons learned with the field in order to continue promoting access to employment and income for youth and people experiencing homelessness and other barriers to employment.

This case study was prepared by [Heartland Alliance National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity](#) as part of the [National Center on Employment and Homelessness \(NCEH\)](#), working to expand access to employment and income for people experiencing homelessness and housing instability.

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