

CHAPTER 10

IPS for Mental Health and Housing Practitioners

This chapter is especially for case managers, counselors, therapists, housing specialists, and others who will refer young people to IPS and support them as they start their careers. Please share this chapter with the practitioners you know by downloading an electronic copy at www.ipsworks.org.

As a mental health or housing practitioner, you may wonder why you should learn about IPS and helping people with jobs. It is true that the IPS specialist will take the lead in providing school and work supports, but IPS uses a team approach. Practitioners support career development within the scope of their positions. For example, an occupational therapist may help a worker learn how to be more efficient in his duties. A counselor may practice social skills a worker can use on the job, or a substance abuse counselor may help a student consider strategies to be able to attend classes and study while sober. As more people register for school and begin working, you may find that those activities have a positive impact on the work that you are already doing with people. For example, some working people find that they must reduce their substance use to be successful at a job they like. Or a young person may become more interested in learning ways to manage her symptoms so that she can continue in school.

10.1 Importance of careers for young people

Young adulthood is when people begin building their careers. An interruption in this process can affect employment status and earnings for many years. And when people are awarded disability benefits, they almost never go on to support themselves through work. In the United States, fewer than three percent of people who are awarded Social Security benefits for a disability ever stop receiving benefits. Even when people only intend to use disability benefits temporarily, they rarely exit the Social Security system. A life on disability benefits is generally a life of poverty, social isolation, poor health outcomes, and social stigma.

IPS offers young people an alternative by helping them plan careers and establish their identities as workers. IPS specialists talk to young people about strategies to earn a living wage. They describe different types of education and training programs—some that last just a few weeks or months, and others that take years to complete. They describe programs that are primarily hands-on training and those that are academic so that people are aware of the range of possible options. Some people only want help with entry-level jobs to quickly begin earning an income. In those cases, IPS specialists help them find work, but they also discuss other options for jobs and training related to each person's interests. They describe how to begin with entry-level work while making long-term plans to build a career.

Your role, as mental health and housing practitioners, in helping people consider careers: Suggest to young people that they try employment before signing up for disability benefits. Explain that people rarely exit the entitlement system in spite of good intentions to do so later on. Describe IPS services. Remind them they can apply for benefits later if they decide they need that type of assistance.

Talk to people about careers on more than one occasion. Ask what jobs they know about and who they know who is working. Ask if they ever thought about a career and what they might enjoy. Describe what you have observed about the person's strengths and how you think those can be related to different jobs and careers. Finally, involve family members and close friends in discussions about school and employment.

10.2 Individual Placement and Support (IPS)

IPS is an effective approach to helping young people begin their careers. IPS specialists help people with jobs and/or education depending on each person's preferences. They also help people investigate different careers and training programs. A young person may like the first job she tries, and she may work in that position for an extended time. Other young people may try several jobs to learn what they enjoy. And some youth alternate between employment and school as they begin their working lives. IPS specialists help, as needed, throughout this process.

"One person wanted to work in the police department. I encouraged her to get involved in the youth police academy to learn more about what police do. But when it was time to apply she seemed very disinterested. Her case manager explained that she didn't know how to complete the application for the program and didn't want to tell me because she was afraid I would think she wasn't bright. I helped her with the application, and she loved participating in the academy—especially riding in the car with the police as they worked in the community. After high school, she got some county scholarships and began classes in Public Officer Standards and Training. She is doing well in those classes now."

Stephanie Crookston, IPS specialist

IPS specialists, mental health practitioners, and housing specialists operate as a team. Each team member has his own role to play in supporting the careers of young people. For example, the IPS specialist must spend all her time focusing on employment and education so that youth will have positive results. Mental health practitioners help with employment within the scope of their positions, such as helping a person practice relaxation skills that he can use on a job. A housing specialist may encourage a young person to persist at his job and help him learn how to take the bus to work. Whenever possible, the practitioners meet at least once a week to brainstorm possible strategies to assist the people on their shared caseloads.

In the United States, state vocational rehabilitation counselors also have a role to play. These counselors are trained to help people who have all types of disabilities. They collaborate with IPS specialists to help young people set goals and to make sure that youth have the resources they need to be successful. Every young person has a written plan that guides the services he receives from that agency.

10.2.1 IPS eligibility and referral

Any young person who is interested in a career is eligible for IPS. People are not excluded even if they have histories of missing appointments, legal problems, addictions, serious mental health symptoms, homelessness, pregnancy, or other issues. The reason to include all youth is that motivation to work is a strong predictor of success.

"I met a young man who used marijuana daily. His goal was to operate machinery at a building supply company, but I was concerned about safety issues. As we talked, he realized that it would be too dangerous to operate machines while under the influence of marijuana, but he did not want to stop using marijuana. We eventually found a stocking position at the building supply store, and he was hired. He developed good relationships with his colleagues, and his supervisor was positive about his work performance. Over time, the young man began accepting more work shifts and eventually only used marijuana recreationally (not daily) so that he could be alert on his job. After six months, I helped him apply for a training subsidy so that he could become a Bobcat operator. He continues to work as a Bobcat operator today and enjoys his job."

Andrea Silva, IPS specialist

Your role, as mental health and housing practitioners, in the referral process: When you make a referral to IPS, ask an IPS specialist to join one of your appointments with the young person. The IPS specialist can describe the IPS program and ask about the young person's interests. You can help during the appointment by sharing what you know of the person's strengths, previous work and education, and ideas you have for good job matches. This will demonstrate how you and the IPS specialist will work together to support the person's career goals. And if a young person is nervous about meeting the IPS specialist, your presence will make the appointment easier for him. Some youth may also want to invite family members to this meeting. When scheduling the appointment, ask which family member or good friend the young person would like to invite.

10.2.2 Rapid job search and education

IPS specialists generally spend a few weeks getting to know each person who is referred to the program. As they talk, the IPS specialist records information about the young person's work and school history, and goals into a form called the Career Profile, and he updates the form as the person has new work/education experiences. Many agencies store the Career Profile in the person's health record so that mental health and housing practitioners also can review the information.

Typically, within 30 days of the young person joining the IPS program, the specialist and young person act on her goals. Youth are not required to complete vocational evaluations or short-term jobs to learn about their strengths and needs. And they do not participate in groups to help the person prepare for the workforce. For example, when a young person enters the program asking for help with a job right away, the IPS specialist begins to help the person collect his work history and references. She offers to advocate for the jobseeker with employers but will help from behind the scenes if that is his preference. Within a few weeks, the IPS specialist, jobseeker, or both together contact business managers in person about possible employment.

Some youth want to start with education. While students are in high school, IPS specialists help by talking with their teachers (with the young person's permission), teaching students good study skills, helping with weekend jobs, and assisting with plans for after graduation. Specialists help high school graduates explore different certificate and degree programs. A young person and his IPS specialist may visit educational institutions together to find out how long programs last, what they cost, and what type of instruction is provided. They discuss the young person's past academic performance to determine the person's likelihood of success (because choosing the wrong program can jeopardize future financial aid and the student's financial investment in school). Most community colleges and other educational institutions require prospective students to take academic tests.

Career exploration is another way to begin IPS services. When youth do not know about possible positions, IPS specialists offer to go with them to visit people working in different occupations and ask about their jobs. They may also meet with state vocational rehabilitation counselors and academic advisors to learn about careers.

Another early activity in the career process is to learn how benefits may be affected by employment. Youth who receive disability benefits, housing subsidies, food stamps, or other entitlements are referred to benefits counselors who can help them understand how their individual financial situations will be affected by earned income.

Your role, as mental health and housing practitioners, at the start of the career process: Ask the young person what he is working on with the IPS specialist. Stay in touch with the IPS specialist and ask how you can help. For example, brainstorm possible job ideas or offer to obtain the young person's education records.

When a young person has a disability, offer to help collect documentation of his disability that can be used to determine eligibility for state vocational rehabilitation or for accommodations in school.

If a young person begins missing appointments with the IPS specialist, ask if he is dissatisfied with IPS and what could improve the service. Offer to go with him to the next appointment with his IPS specialist. Or, if he simply does not remember appointments, brainstorm with him and his IPS specialist about different strategies to help him keep track of scheduled meetings.

Talk with the young person about whether he wants to share personal information, such as information about a disability or involvement in your services, with employers and educators. The IPS specialist will also discuss sharing personal information, but if you know the person best, you may help the IPS specialist gain a better understanding of the person's perspective.

Refrain from providing information about earned income and benefits because rules are complicated and change frequently. But, share the message that most people benefit financially from working even if they lose some benefits. Encourage people to meet with trained benefits planners to learn more about their individual situations.

10.2.3 Supports for education

High school students who have disclosed that they have a disability to their teachers have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). The plans are intended to help students graduate, and during the last year of high school, plans also include goals related to what the student will do after high school. IEP meetings occur at least once each year, though they may be scheduled more frequently, if needed. Family members are always invited for students who have not reached the age of majority, and IPS specialists are usually able to attend IEP meetings with permission from family members. The role of IPS specialists in IEP meetings is to help the group think about possible accommodations that will help the student graduate, to generate ideas to support the student's studies (such as helping the student with a study schedule), to assist with after school jobs, and to help the student explore possible future careers.

Some youth report that IEP meetings focus on problems and are discouraging. Therefore, another role for IPS specialists and others is to point out the student's strengths and accomplishments.

"IEP meetings tend to focus on what is not going well. It can be overwhelming to students. Then students don't engage in the meeting but just wait for it to end—they don't feel hopeful even though there is a plan of action. When it is my time to speak, I point out something positive such as the student is meeting with me or the student came to the IEP meeting. Or I may talk about what the student is doing to find a job. I get the student involved in the discussion by asking the student what he wants. You have to be there for the young person."

Regina Johnson-Crockett, IPS specialist

Supports for postsecondary educational programs vary based on each student's needs. Examples include helping students keep track of test dates and project due dates, creating study schedules with students, assisting students to ask for accommodations through the Office for Students with Disabilities, helping students decide when to drop classes, family meetings to talk about the student's progress and what supports would help her, and assistance finding resources for computers or training equipment. When young people participate in long-term education programs, the IPS specialist may help the person get started and provide support for one or a few semesters, but they close the person's IPS case when she has good school performance and she anticipates she will continue to do well. When a young person wants help with work, or more school supports, she may ask for help from IPS again.

Your role, as a mental health or housing practitioner, in education supports: Encourage high school students to graduate. A high school degree is related to the amount a person is employed over her adulthood as well as her lifetime earnings. When students plan to drop out of high school because they think they will complete a General Educational Development (GED) certificate instead, explain that it may be difficult because GED classes are based on independent study and many adults find it difficult to attend classes while supporting themselves through work. Help students think about their future. Share how high school degrees relate to having more choices about jobs and higher earnings.

Assist students in vocational training or college programs by asking about their classes. Does she understand the material that is taught and is she comfortable asking questions? Has she missed any classes? Is she working on papers and other assignments? Share what you know about the student's progress with the IPS specialist and plan supports together.

When a student experiences mental health symptoms that affect her ability to learn and participate in class, join the student for her next appointment with the medication prescriber to ask if a medication adjustment could help. Talk to the student about coping skills she can use in class and study groups. Offer help with social skills, as needed.

10.2.4 Supports for working a job

The type and intensity of job supports provided by an IPS specialist depend on the worker's preferences, when she started the job (typically more supports are provided when jobs are new), feedback from her supervisor, the person's work history, mental health symptoms (if any), substance abuse problems (if any), strengths, and family supports. Examples of job supports include family meetings to talk about the job, meetings with supervisors to discuss what is going well and what can be improved, regular meetings with the worker to talk about her job, help obtaining work clothes or uniforms, assistance learning how to get to work, wake-up calls, help reporting income to benefits systems, meetings with benefits counselors to learn how work income will affect entitlements, help asking for accommodations such as schedule changes or altered duties, and assistance reviewing orientation materials.

Some young people no longer want the help of an IPS specialist when they become employed. But after working a job or two, many youth decide that job supports are helpful to them. IPS specialists encourage youth to try job supports. They also strive to make job supports appealing by offering to meet at convenient times and locations.

After a working person has been employed steadily for about a year on average, the IPS specialist helps the person transition from her caseload. She speaks with him about whether he thinks that he continues to need her assistance and whether another person in his life can help with job supports.

Your role, as a mental health or housing practitioner, in supporting employment: Encourage youth to try employment supports. Help IPS specialists to develop job support plans that are acceptable to each young person relating to his preferences for disclosure, where he likes to spend time, and other factors.

Provide job supports within the scope of your role. For example, you can help young people think about social situations at work, discuss how to manage mental health symptoms on the job, or you can meet with youth and their family members to talk about jobs.

In some cases, you may be the person chosen to provide ongoing job supports after a young person transitions from the IPS team. Meet with the IPS specialist and working person together to be sure you know what has helped with job problems in the past, and what help the working person thinks would be helpful now.

Conclusion

IPS is an effective method for helping young people with education and employment. The approach used is team-based. Mental health or housing practitioners help youth consider careers and stay in close contact with IPS practitioners to support youth as they pursue their goals. IPS helps people pursue regular employment and education very soon after they enter the program. And young people are helped with employment and education programs that are related to their preferences and individual situations.