

The Boston Globe

Pilot to give job services to recently homeless

By [Robert Gavin](#)

Globe Staff / November 28, 2009

When people with histories of chronic homelessness are placed in permanent housing, the approach to job placement is typically to give them time. Time to get settled. Time to get used to new surroundings. Time to recover from addiction and abuse.

But hopeFound, a nonprofit homeless services agency, is asking, "Why wait?"

HopeFound of Boston is launching a \$1 million pilot project to demonstrate that quickly connecting newly housed individuals to jobs will help prevent them from returning to the streets. Over the next three years, the WorkFirst project will provide a variety of employment services to 140 clients within 90 days of their placement in permanent housing, typically subsidized apartments. Their progress will be compared with a control group that doesn't receive these services.

If the results confirm that early employment services succeed in finding people work and keeping them in homes, the project could provide a national model for addressing homelessness, hopeFound officials said. "You have to become self-sufficient," said Mary Nee, executive director of hopeFound. "If we don't look at this next step, then they'll be back in the shelters."

Several foundations and a \$75,000 grant from the city of Boston are funding the program, one of the first in the nation to gather empirical evidence on the relationship between job placement services and reducing homelessness.

John Rio, a specialist on employment and homelessness, called WorkFirst a "pioneering effort that will be meaningful to the field."

A job does more than provide income to pay the rent, said Rio, senior program associate at Advocates for Human Potential Inc., a Sudbury consulting firm that specializes in social issues. Work also provides a social network that connects people to the mainstream of American life and often defines them, he said.

"Being a member of a community means having a viable role in it, and for most of us, that's gained by employment," Rio said. "If we are trying to end homelessness, we have to provide not just a roof over people's heads, but also a place in society."

William Gonzalez, a member of the WorkFirst advisory board, knows the importance of employment services. He was first left homeless when his mother abandoned him as a teenager. He experienced at least three other periods of homelessness as he lost jobs over the next two decades.

During his last bout of homelessness, about three years ago, he received help on resume writing, interviewing, and other job search skills from Impact Employment Services, a program of hopeFound.

Today, Gonzalez, 41, is a billing specialist at a drug testing laboratory and lives in a condo in Winchester.

“When you have a job, your mind set becomes, ‘I’m changing my life,’ ” he said. “Your self-worth increases 10 times.”

HopeFound last week began selecting participants for the program, which will provide career counseling, including home visits; short-term job training with stipends; internship opportunities; clothing and transportation assistance; and other services.

Quickly providing employment services appears a logical next step to a decade-long movement in addressing homelessness known as “housing first,” homeless advocates said. The housing first approach places clients in permanent housing as soon as possible and provides support services such as drug and alcohol counseling in that setting. That contrasts with providing such services in shelters until clients are deemed ready for apartments.

Studies of housing first programs show that about 80 percent of clients remain housed after a year, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, an advocacy group in Washington.

Likewise, employment services shouldn’t wait until a client is deemed ready to work, said Nee, hopeFound’s executive director. They should be provided quickly as part of the broader support for the newly housed.

“We’re hoping,” she said, “that this will be the next move in the movement.”

The charitable groups funding the pilot project are the [Bank of New York](#) Mellon Charitable Giving Program, Oak Foundation of Geneva, United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley, and Walmart Foundation.

Robert Gavin can be reached at rgavin@globe.com. ■