

Vocational Rehabilitation
Programs and AIDS Service
Organizations: A Pilot Study
for Rural and Small Town
Men with HIV/AIDS

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HIV/AIDS and Employment

- High unemployment and employment loss for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA); several studies show levels at the fifty percent mark or higher (Dray-Spira et al., 2005)
- While antiretroviral combination drug therapies have lead to improved health, better prognoses, and an increased interest in employment for many PLWHA, many have not benefited equally from these advancements and face greater barriers to employment (Conyers & Datti, 2008)

Implications for Consumers

- Need to invest in options that will lead to jobs and opportunities that can meet individual and family needs.
- Need to be aware of ways in which consumers can retain health insurance and other benefits while working.
- Need to understand benefits of participating in vocational development even if there is not an immediate outcome.

Implications for HIV Services Providers/AIDS Service Organizations (ASOs)

- For effective advocacy, need to document gap in vocational rehabilitation services for their consumers
- Need to be aware of opportunities to advocate for better access and funding for vocational rehabilitation services that attend to health and prevention outcomes
- Need to be aware of existing federal, state, and other resources and how to best access and benefit from these systems

- The State-Federal Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) is one of those systems
- Many PLWHA may be eligible and may benefit from these services
- However, many may not even know they exist.
- Many PLWHA may prefer to have services provided via ASOs
- ASOs have limited funding and knowledge of vocational services; consumers concerned about confidentiality, disclosure, stigma, or discrimination may reduce access to VR and other programs

Employment Services for PLWHA

- Minimal number of (and research on) programs specifically geared toward employment issues of PLWHA and that assist them in vocational and financial development (e.g., Kirk Employment Empowerment Project and Making a Plan)*
- While other HIV-specific employment services have recently been emerging, these programs tend to be based in large urban areas (Conyers, Escovitz, & Misrok, 2006)
- With appropriate resources, ASOs and other organizations serving PLWHA can bring employment and related services and resources in-house.

*See Escovitz & Donegan, 2005 and Kohlenberg & Watts, 2003

The following describes a vocational program that was provided for rural and small town men. While there was concentration on issues pertinent to men, particularly in rural areas, the core of the program is considered to be potentially beneficial for a diverse population of PLWHA and can be tailored to suit the needs of clientele.

An Employment/Career Group for Rural and Small Town Men with HIV/AIDS (Datti, 2008)

Some background:

- Infection rates for men continue to be on the rise
- Ratio of men to women with HIV/AIDS is almost 3:1
- Men who have sex with men (MSM) most affected – account for more than two thirds of all men living with HIV and over half of all new HIV/AIDS cases
- Steady rise in infection among men in small cities and rural areas

Issues for Rural and Small Town Men (and others)

- Stigma associated with HIV/AIDS (and MSM) tends to be higher in rural areas (Foster & Frazier, 2008; Preston et al., 2007)
- Increased poverty, substandard housing, and insufficient employment opportunities (Heckman et al., 1998)
- Fewer employment, career, and vocational rehabilitation service opportunities (ERS, 1997)

In addition...

- Fears about the loss of SSI/SSDI cash benefits, health insurance (e.g., Medicare/Medicaid)
- Episodic changes in health, physical and mental health issues, and medication issues
- Apprehension about job seeking, interviewing, and employment skills

Logic Model

Vocational Identity

+

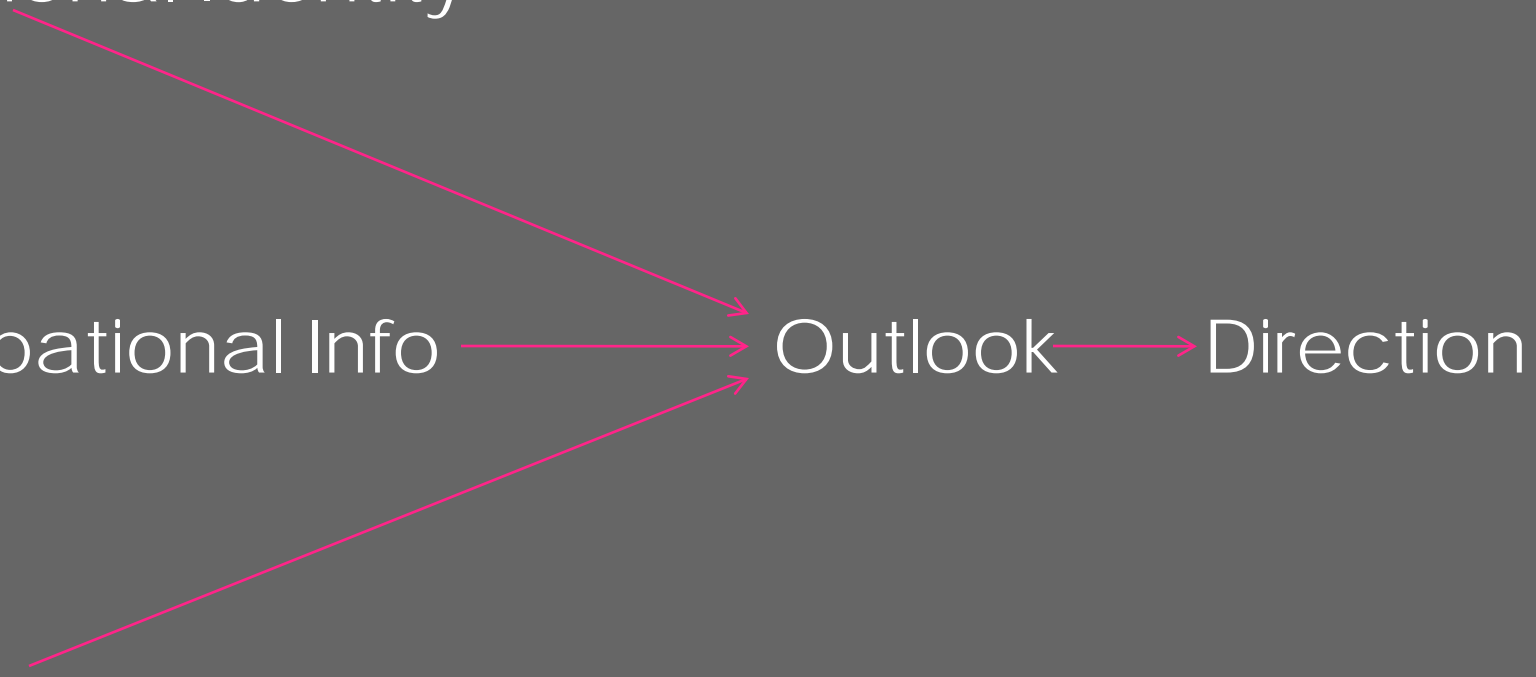
Occupational Info

+/-

Barriers

Outlook

Direction



Hypotheses

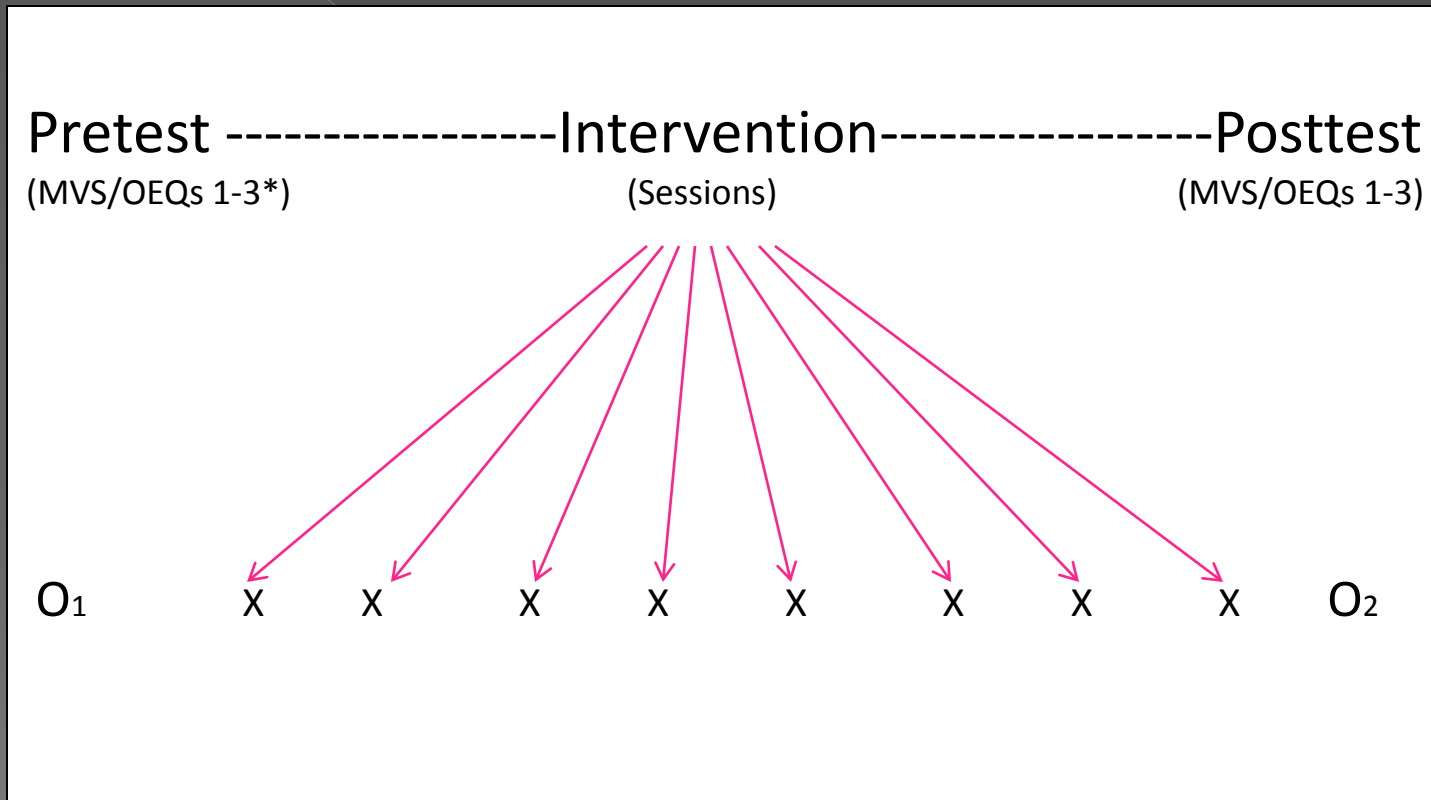
Participants expected to:

- (a) experience positive changes in their *vocational identities*
- (b) gain knowledge about jobs, training opportunities, and state vocational rehabilitation services (*occupational information*), and
- (c) experience a reduction in perceived *barriers to employment* and career development.

Program Design

- Biweekly psychoeducational group counseling sessions over the course of approximately 12 weeks
- Groups co-led by two master's level certified counselors with expertise in vocational rehabilitation and HIV/AIDS issues.
- *My Vocational Situation* - a 20 item, self-administered, and hand-scored instrument that measures vocational identity, occupational information, and perceived barriers to employment
(Holland, Daiger, & Power, 1980)
- *Open-Ended Questions* - pertaining to barriers, assistance needed, and knowledge of state-federal VR

Design Model



Note. MVS = My Vocational Situation; OEQs = Open-ended questions

*OEQs 4-6 (Evaluation) administered at posttest only.

Group Session Outline

<u>Session</u>	<u>Description</u>
1	Overview of the group; confidentiality/informed consent; members' needs and how the group can help; pretest assessments.
2	To work or not to work and why; potential benefits and pitfalls, real and perceived stigma/discrimination.
3	SSI/SSDI/Medicare/Medicaid information and resources, state-federal vocational rehabilitation (VR) services information and resources; disclosure and reasonable accommodation.
4	Impact of work on health; taking medication on time/side effect considerations; self care; disability management.
5	Job skills, experience, training, and interests; transferable skills analyses; employment and training exploration tools (e.g., O*Net vocational data).
6	Resume writing and updating workshop.
7	Job seeking/interviewing skills training; revisit disclosure and accommodations.
8	Adjustment to work demands; health insurance; follow up supports and referrals; posttest assessments.

Participants

- Six men from rural/small town areas.
- Mean age: 43.8
- 2 HIV+, 4 CDC-defined AIDS
- 5 Gay, 1 Heterosexual
- 5 White, 1 African American
- 4 Unemployed, 2 Employed*
- Education range: Trade/Vocational Training – Graduate School

*One participant obtained a job during the program but was unemployed at inception

Changes in Vocational Identity as Measured by the MVS

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Pretest</u>	<u>Posttest</u>	<u>Difference</u>
1	4	3	-1
2	17	N/A	N/A
3	5	14	+9
4	5	10	+5
5	17	18	+1
6	9	N/A	N/A
Mean	7.75	11.25	

Note. Score range is 1 – 18, with 18 being the highest and most favorable; MVS mean = 16.54

Changes in Occupational Information as Measures by the MVS

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Pretest</u>	<u>Posttest</u>	<u>Difference</u>
1	2	3	+1
2	4	N/A	N/A
3	1	4	+3
4	0	4	+4
5	1	4	+3
6	4	N/A	N/A
Mean	1.0	3.75	

Note. Score range is 1 – 4, with 4 being the highest and most favorable; MVS mean: 2.63

Changes in Perceived Barriers to Employment as Measures by the MVS

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Pretest</u>	<u>Posttest</u>	<u>Difference</u>
1	1	1	0*
2	4	N/A	N/A
3	4	3	-1*
4	0	2	+2
5	1	3	+2
6	4	N/A	N/A
Mean	1.5	2.25	

Note. Score range is 1 – 4, with 4 being the highest and most favorable; MVS mean = 3.35.

Barriers (cont.)

Barriers reported at pretest:

- (a) obtaining and maintaining health insurance
- (b) the ability to function for an entire workday without fatigue or tiredness
- (c) having to hide HIV status at work
- (d) inability to cope with increased stress
- (e) needing time off and income in cases of episodic illness and inability to work.
- (f) explaining long gaps between work
- (g) needing more frequent bathroom breaks

At posttest, only barriers b, c, and g remained. No new barriers were listed

Assistance Needed

(to address barriers)

Assistance reported at pretest:

- (a) uncertain of assistance needed ("not sure")
- (b) avenues to obtain health insurance at a reasonable cost
- (c) legal assistance to solve potential problems and ensure rights
- (d) job resources
- (e) outside venues for discussion (support)
- (f) access to support within the workplace.

At posttest, only assistance c remained.

Re: State-Federal VR

Regarding *knowledge* of VR, at pretest:

- two participants responded that they knew "nothing"
- three responded that they knew "not much/very little"
- and one noted, in an interrogative manner, "Not much more than they can help obtain training for employment?"

At posttest, however, all participants expressed knowledge including facts such as

- (a) they help you to obtain employment
- (b) they answer questions and provide guidelines for people with disabilities looking for work
- (c) they are helpful with laws and federal allowances.

*3 group members reported intent to pursue VR services by the end of the group

Quotes

"I've learned a lot about it [State VR] and am currently in the process of taking advantage of it."

"The tangible resources are excellent. I can use them now or in the future. I am the kind of person that likes to gather as much information as possible in case I ever need it."

"For years I thought I couldn't return to work without losing my [SSDI] checks. But now that I have the information, I found that not only can I go back to work and keep the benefits I need, but the procedure is pretty easy...I am starting my job next month."

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- One-Stop Career Centers by State: 1-877-US2-JOBS or <http://www.servicelocator.org/>
- National Working Positive Coalition: workingpositive.net