

# IMPLEMENTATION OF THE READY, SET, GO: MOVING TOWARDS EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM WITH MENTAL HEALTH CLIENTS

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In many ways, Violet (not her real name) was typical of the sort of client who might come through the doors of any agency working with individuals struggling with mental health issues. Violet, 51, diagnosed with schizophrenia and a criminal history of shoplifting, had not held a job in over 5 years. Having expressed an interest in getting back to work, Violet was funneled through the standard employment rehabilitation channels. For months she was kept busy with a combination of vocational training, anxiety reduction sessions, and a course geared at teaching her the skills she needed to work in a retail environment. A subsequent job placement program helped her land a job and supported her through her first few months. In total, Violet received 11.7 months of service. She then worked successfully for 2.5 months before relapsing, and eventually lost her job.

This is a common cycle for individuals in many vocational rehabilitation programs, particularly if they are offenders or individuals with mental illness. While those programs may pair clients with vocational counselors and hours of training and services, the end result sees too many failing to find or sustain employment. At the same time, research indicates that 70-90% of individuals with mental illness want to pursue competitive employment. Employment has been shown to be a key contributor in recovery, generally providing a normalizing experience while providing structure and allowing individuals to better engage with their

communities. When it comes to rehabilitating offenders, employment also improves outcomes: while as many as two-thirds are unemployed before going to prison, helping them find work upon release has been shown to be an important recovery

milestone, and an intervention to prevent reoffending.

The Ready, Set, Go: Moving Towards Employment (RSG) Program is a unique, group-based intervention program that adopts a radically different approach in assisting offenders with mental health needs as they move towards employment as part of their community reintegration. Rather than focusing the intervention on teaching cognitive behavioral skills and/or emphasizing support and encouragement for living and coping with existing problems and obstacles, both of which are important in some ways, the RSG Program hones in on developing intrinsic motivation, a critical component for making a personal commitment to change and for garnering the insight required for individuals to want to move their lives in a new direction. Motivational practice helps individuals become “ready, willing, and able” to tackle some core issues in their lives, and a commitment to change is a prerequisite for the effort required to realize it. That commitment arises, fundamentally, out of an understanding of the need to change, the individual’s capacity to begin effecting this change (i.e., self-efficacy expectations), and the importance one attaches for this change to begin with some sense of urgency.

The RSG Program’s approach to vocational rehabilitation is different right from the client’s initial assessment, when they are evaluated for their readiness for work. Operating within a motivational framework, the RSG Program uses a unique three-stage program designed to move participants through a series of steps:

- **Acceptance of the need to change.**
- **Problem recognition.**
- **Problem definition.**
- **Setting a plan for change.**
- **Reviewing and practicing efforts to change in order to control the risks for relapse, e.g., helping offenders to maintain employment.**

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By the time participants reach the program's third phase, the focus shifts to common issues of getting, keeping and maintaining a job, and includes a session on preparing for work. Participants also spend time looking back at past attempts at employment in a bid to highlight anticipated key problems while working with their new skills and motivation to chart new, more effective responses. The next phase then includes periods of actual work experience (lasting from a half-day to 2 full days), with follow-up sessions where the participant assesses his or her own work trial experience to determine its effectiveness, and to assess whether any unanticipated problems came up, and if so, whether they were dealt with appropriately. This three-part process can be repeated as frequently as necessary with individuals who may have problems adjusting to the workplace. The process is also conducted in consultation with a job developer who works closely with the individual to find a suitable, ongoing work opportunity.

The RSG Program has now been fully implemented and evaluated within the vocational rehabilitation program at Frontenac Community Mental Health and Addiction Services (FCMHAS), a non-profit organization providing services to individuals with mental health and addiction issues in Kingston, Ontario. Though the majority of their programs support individuals with mental health issues, in 2011-2012 an estimated 15% of their clients were disclosed offenders (those numbers are, however, not formally tracked). Vocational rehabilitation is one of the many services FCMHAS offers.

Since the RSG Program was first implemented at FCMHAS in late 2009, results indicate the program has already had a significantly positive impact on vocational training. Clients within the vocational program are moving through the system more quickly, and staff are able to intake more people. This increase in processing time means a shorter waiting list to get accepted into the program, and less time before people are ready to enter the work force. The manager of Vocational Rehabilitation at FCMHAS described the RSG Program as "not just implementing a training program, but changing the way that we deliver Vocational Rehabilitation," explaining that it "coordinated the implementation of a new way of assessing, working, and supporting clients in their vocational goals."

Some of the initial findings since the implementation of the RSG Program at FCMHAS are as follows:

- **Intakes to the vocational rehabilitation program increased from 68 (in 2008-2009) to 247 after the implementation of the RSG Program (2011-2012).**
- **The average length of time from intake to employment decreased from 17.1 months (2008-2009) to 6 months (2011-2012).**
- **Length of time required to find work upon completion of training decreased from 6.5 months (2008-2009) to 1.47 months (2011-2012).**

Within 30 days of completing the RSG Program, 70% of participants were employed, and within 90 days, every participant had work. The program has also had a significant impact on job retention:

- **Average job retention among individuals after completion of training went from 161 months (2008-2009) to 351 months (2011-2012).**

Finally, RSG Program participants are not only finding work more quickly and staying employed for more time, but job developers are also seeing them working more hours at jobs within the community. In the past, by comparison, an individual may have tried working between two and four jobs before successfully retaining one. Clients are also more motivated to work in competitive employment, and are working more hours per week than before the implementation of the RSG Program. For agencies receiving funding based on client outcome, this is a major benefit.

According to a job developer at FCMHAS, "due to increased motivation, problem awareness, and enhanced communication skills, individuals with mental illness are not as stigmatized in the work place as frequently."

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She also says that as a result of participating in the RSG Program, “clients have demonstrated the capacity to work and meet employers’ expectations, such as hours of work and work duties, and are thus, requiring fewer accommodations.”

Overall, the RSG Program allows clients to take control of their own progress and to reach independence by engaging their core beliefs and desires, rather than merely keeping them “safe” within the existing system

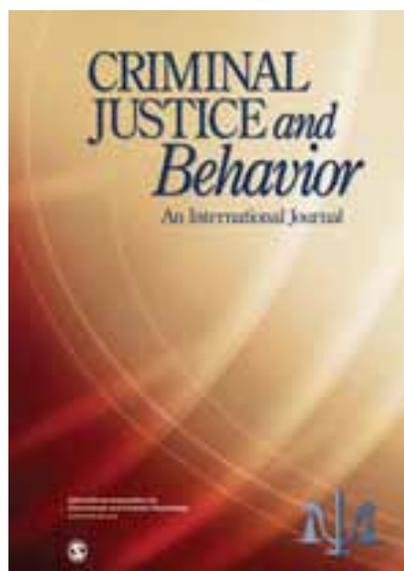
of providing services. Program participants develop the intrinsic motivation skills that not only allow them to find and keep jobs, but that continue to serve them as they successfully reintegrate themselves into the community.

*This article is based on a presentation by the author given at the International Corrections and Prisons Association’s (ICPA’s) 14<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference in Mexico City, October 28-November 2, 2012.*

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