

Helping People with HIV/AIDS Return to the Workforce: Successes and Challenges of a Return-to-work Program in Toronto

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This fact sheet is based on a needs assessment of Employment Action (EA), a return-to-work program for people living with HIV/AIDS in Toronto. The needs assessment, conducted by the AIDS Committee of Toronto in 2001-2002, included a client survey as well as focus groups and personal interviews with clients. This fact sheet highlights successes and challenges experienced by clients, and the program responses that have since been developed.¹

What is Employment Action (EA)?

Employment Action (EA) is a service that provides people living with HIV/AIDS (PHAs) the information, tools, and support that they need to (re)enter the workforce. The service is free and confidential and is designed to offer advice on disability benefits, career decision making, career action plans, advice on accessing retraining and appropriate funding, placement opportunities, and to provide follow-up support. EA started in 1999 as a joint program between the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT) and the Toronto People With AIDS Foundation (TPWAF). ACT provides employment services to EA clients, while TPWAF provides counselling and advice on how returning-to-work may affect their disability and benefits programs. In addition, the HIV/AIDS Legal Clinic of Ontario (HALCO) provides legal assistance to PHAs seeking advice about benefits and other matters.

Who are the EA Participants?

The majority of EA survey participants are fairly well educated men in their 30s and 40s whose current source of income is provincial and/or federal disability support programs. Almost half (46%) of EA survey participants indicated that ODSP was their primary income source. More than half of all survey participants were university or college graduates. Slightly more than a third of survey participants (36%) were recent immigrants to Canada, half of whom were university/college graduates.

Successes of EA

In general EA participants indicated that they benefited in a number of ways from EA including:

- Help with Resumes, advice on training and skills upgrading
- Help with writing job applications
- Advice on benefits programs
- Help with training courses (especially computer-based)
- Emotional support while they explore return-to-work options and counselling about HIV/AIDS disclosure in the workplace

Several EA participants commented on the success of EA. For Example:

"They helped me a great deal with my resume showed me how to set it up so we could avoid that gap in employment. They did it in a way that wasn't a chronological resume but rather a functional resume, which I didn't even know about...and then [consultant] did a mock interview which went a long way to boost my confidence."

"You start to think about rebuilding your life ... rebuilding your dreams, rebuilding your faith and your confidence in yourself to just go back out there and go after all your dreams again."

Challenges Experienced by EA Clients

The needs analysis identified three broad categories of challenges affecting the outcomes of clients' involvement in the program. These challenges included:

ACCESS TO SERVICES

- Clients expressed difficulty accessing Employment Consultants due to the high demand for consultant's time.
- Services and courses were not available at more varied times (e.g. evening classes)

BREADTH OF SERVICES

- Is the Employment Action program too ambitious? Is it trying to achieve unrealistic goals?
- What should be the role of EA in relation to benefits programs?
- Should EA be playing a stronger advocacy role with respect to benefits agencies?
- What should EA's role be in finding jobs for clients?

WHAT IS EA'S MANDATE?

- Many clients expected the role of EA to be strictly as a job bank or 'job-placement' service.

Program Responses

ACT and TPWAF have responded to the program challenges with specific innovations.

Clients currently receive an initial intake appointment with an EA consultant within two weeks, compared to a previous average of up to four weeks. Clients can also access the Job Hunter's Drop In, Resume Clinic, and Benefits Clinic without needing an appointment to see an EA consultant. More evening course and clinics have also been made available to clients.

A weekly Back to Work and Benefits Clinic has been made available. Its role is to educate clients on how returning to work may affect their benefits, how to access medication coverage and how to re-access benefits should the work experience prove unsuccessful.

A weekly Job Hunter's Drop In session allows clients to view postings not available to the general public, interact with other PHAs and to discuss job search techniques with an on-site Job Developer.

Individual promotional material for each EA component has been developed. These promotional materials are now supported by more detailed and informative EA brochures.

Conclusion

Overall the experiences of PHAs accessing the EA program have been positive. The service is meeting most of the core needs of PHAs and is seen by the majority of clients to provide a supportive environment managed by skilled consultants. There are areas that can be improved and capacity increased. Clearly not all the needs can be met in a single program. The next steps will be to identify more clearly what needs the program should (or can) reasonably address?

(1) The full report, *Working Positive: A Needs Assessment of Employment Action for People Living with HIV/AIDS*, is available from the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT) or from ACT's website (www.actontario.org). The Canadian Working Group on HIV and Rehabilitation (CWGHR) funded the research, but is not responsible for the views expressed in the report or fact sheet.