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## Experiences Seeking Meaningful Employment for Individuals with Substance Use Disorder in York County Maine

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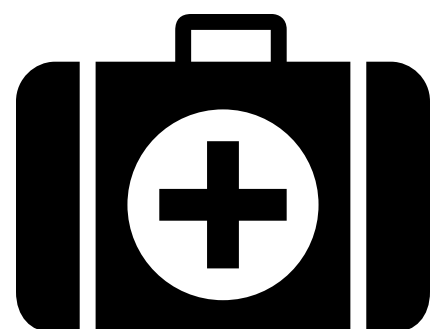
# Experiences Seeking Meaningful Employment for Individuals with Substance Use Disorder York County, ME

Two focus groups and one interview conducted in November 2021 collected information from a total of six respondents regarding their employment experiences in York County as individuals receiving treatment for substance use disorder. The guided discussion covered topics related to resources and services for finding employment opportunities, experiences obtaining meaningful employment, and potential barriers and facilitators to maintaining employment. The interview and focus groups were facilitated and analyzed by experienced researchers from the Catherine Cutler Institute at the University of Southern Maine.

## Respondent Characteristics



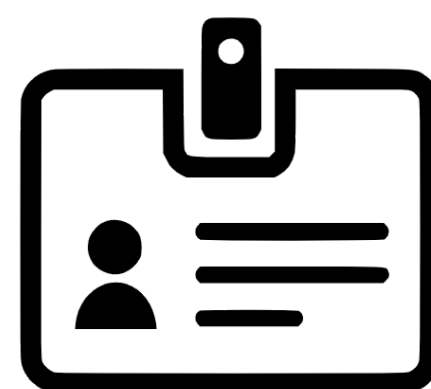
**6**  
Total  
Respondents



**100%**  
Currently Receiving Treatment  
for Substance Use Disorder



**36 y/o**  
Average  
Age



**2/3**  
Employed  
Full-time

## Employment Services

Participants reported awareness of the following employment services or supports in their communities (listed alphabetically):

- Biddeford Staffing Agency (unspecified)
- Bonney Staffing
- Employment Assistance Through SUD Peer-to-Peer Support Person
- Facebook Posts/Advertisements
- Goodwill Workforce Solutions
- Indeed
- Labor Ready
- Maine JobLink
- Portland resource that hires felons and individuals with SUD
- York County Community Action Corporation Transportation Program
- York County Jail Pre-release Employment Assistance

“I was introduced to the opioid grant<sup>1</sup> through Goodwill Workforce Solution[s] and that has been such a blessing. They deal with Maine JobLink and the career centers.”

Participants who have worked with Goodwill Workforce Solutions and Maine JobLink services found them easy to use and effective at matching individuals with appropriate employment opportunities. However, participants noted that other generalized staffing agencies can be more challenging to work with.

## Finding Employment

### Facilitators:

When it comes to finding meaningful employment opportunities, participants indicated that they generally had greater success with resources affiliated with the SUD recovery community such as peer support workers, staffing agencies for individuals in recovery, or simply voicing their concerns at AA/NA recovery meetings. Choosing this route helps individuals navigate stigma in the community to find employers willing to hire people with a complex work history and to develop a flexible schedule around their treatment program. Participants also highlighted the benefits of finding assistance in one place; often it can be difficult to know where to start and having one place to look for resources can remove much of the burden in finding employment. Further facilitators for success were also shared regarding SUD-specific employment agencies that partner with employers already willing to work with this population.

“Right now, it’s a worker’s market. If people are serious about recovery and employment, you can have it.”

“The toughest thing is trying to find somebody, if you’re working an honest program as they say, when you’re telling people this is what my life looks like, these are the things you can expect when you hire me, finding somebody that will take that chance on you because they have been burned so many times by people like us who are in active use.”

“I know that we have a peer-to-peer support person who will help us if we are looking.”

<sup>1</sup> Maine Department of Labor “Connecting with Opportunities Initiative” (<https://www.maine.gov/labor/bes/coi>)



# Finding Employment

## Barriers:

Participants shared that a lack of experience, training, or employment history, in addition to any history of criminal activity or felony conviction, can pose barriers to finding employment. Participants also discussed how an individual’s involvement in treatment often requires scheduling flexibility which can reportedly dissuade employers from hiring individuals with SUD. Further, the stigma attached to these factors reportedly plays a significant role in whether an individual is able to obtain gainful employment.

Additionally, participants discussed the lack of access to transportation services, stable housing, and phone or internet service, all of which can be harder to find following the transition from a carceral setting and make securing meaningful employment a challenge. In addition to those challenges encountered in searching for meaningful employment, participants frequently discussed personal challenges with procrastination, depression, or even return-to-use which can hinder an individual’s motivation to continue their employment search.

“It’s hard to find a job that pays well that matches my schedule.”

“It was really difficult to get a job especially if you were a felon.”

# Maintaining Employment

## Facilitators:

To maintain employment participants stressed the importance of being respectful, reliable, and flexible because building rapport with your employer can result in them being more flexible and understanding with your treatment. Similarly, participants discussed how building rapport with your doctor helps establish a level of trust that is important for situations when you may need to cancel or reschedule an appointment, for example, being called into work on short notice. Participants also indicated that having frequent check-ins with employers, including positive feedback and constructive criticism, contributed to their ability to stay employed.

## Barriers:

In addition to the barriers to finding employment, participants also discussed ongoing challenges once employed such as the need for reliable transportation, stable housing, and childcare. Other barriers, such as conflicting schedules with their treatment program, pose challenges to maintaining employment for individuals with substance use disorder.

“So, what I have found on that is you got the hard part over you’ve found a job right? You’ve found an employer that is willing to be flexible with you. You’ve got to be flexible with them, too.”

“You need the employer to be understanding and patient as far as training goes and just getting acclimated to the job.”

"A lot of it is working up a rapport with the people around you. Your doctor, your employer, you know like if your employer says this guy just called out...you have got to be able to call your doctor and say I got called into work if you have an appointment that day. Maybe if you have a good enough rapport you can move your appointment without suspicion on their end and make your employer happy."

# Maintaining Recovery

## Facilitators:

Participants discussed ways in which employment can help them remain engaged and successful in their recovery, sharing that the new time commitment keeps them busy and leaves less free time to fall back into old habits which can be unproductive towards recovery goals. Furthermore, some participants highlighted the benefit of seeing the fruits of their labor as a motivating factor that helps them work harder to succeed in both their employment and recovery.

“Ever since I have been in recovery, my whole life has changed. I am always [like] early for work, I’m always the first to volunteer, and I think staying busy helps keep me in recovery too. “

“The bank account has been like my new drug... It is nice to see the fruits of your labor you know you see it happen you see it grow and that gives you other opportunities and you look back and realize that wouldn’t happen if you didn’t have this job and that gives you a new appreciation for the job and the life you have now.”

"You know you go to work every day; you’re making money...It gives you something to look forward to, that you’re proud of."

