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Real Jobs, Real Community, Real Wages: A Guide to Customized Employment

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Real Jobs, Real Community, Real Wages: A Guide to Customized Employment

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Agency Introduction

Dakota County Adult Services (AS) and Community Living Services (CLS) provide community-based services to protect and support the most vulnerable children and adults in our community. AS/CLS promotes the capacity of communities to provide for their own safety, self-sufficiency, and quality of life. More specifically, this umbrella of services includes: Adult Protection and Investigation, Chemical and Mental Health Assessment, Pre-Petition Screening, Developmental Disabilities (DD), Aging and Elderly, Long Term Care, and Consumer-Directed Services. Community Living Services provides services to nearly 4,500 ongoing and contracted individuals. Similarly, Adult Services serves approximately 3,600 clients and manages services with contracted vendors totaling more than \$7million.

Purpose

The purpose of this capstone project is to develop a customized employment self-guided training and an in-person training based on evidence-based research. The customized employment guide and in-person training will strive to motivate and educate various entities of Dakota County Social Services, initially implemented with AS/CLS sections, for more individualized approaches to attaining and maintaining employment. The goal of the customized employment guide and training is to have a fluid, consistent, and a readily available training tool for managers, social workers, contracted agencies, providers, and direct care staff within Dakota County AS/CLS. Furthermore, it will embody the AS/CLS value of person-centered approaches that are consistent in maintaining client health and safety and fairness to access supports into its everyday services for customized employment. This embraces the goals of Dakota County AS/CLS to devote energy and momentum towards more customized employment approaches to ultimately increase employment rates, opportunities, wages, and quality of life for individuals with disabilities and mental illness.

Literature Review

According to the Mental Health Legislative Network, 70% of adults with a serious mental illness would like to be employed, yet are not working (MHLN, 2012). Many stakeholders, legislators, communities, and individuals see this as being a significant problem, as people with mental illness have the highest unemployment rates, which is costly to the individuals and to our communities. Barriers to employment not only affect individuals with mental health issues, but are prevalent across populations with disabilities. Specifically in regards to customized employment, Mueser *et al.* (1997) found, "Individuals with mental illness who had been employed for at least six months tended to have higher self-esteem than when they began working" (p.482). Customized employment opportunities for this population appear to have positive psychosocial outcomes based on evidence-based research. Similarly, Van Dongen (1996) found considerably higher levels of self-esteem and quality of life, as well as, increased working attitudes and beliefs when employed in the community. These conclusions are significant to AS/CLS customized employment approaches, as the overall focus is on services that are specifically driven by the individual to find a *real* job, in the *real* community, with a *real* wage.

Methodology

A systematic literature review was conducted on concepts supported by AS/CLS systems and program capacities that support approaches to customized employment options for people with mental illness or disability. The concepts used to screen the literature and research also supports widespread core values and principles of AS/CLS including: person-centered approaches, maintaining the most vulnerable population's health and safety, fairness of access to services, consistency and accountability, and the attempt to continuously improve the quality and outcomes for all service areas. The systematic literature review considers relative environmental factors that relate to the effectiveness of the training such as: rural or urban setting, diversity, socioeconomic status, availability of resources, and other community demographics. This will assure the development of an effective, useable, and innovative customized employment guide that is supported by evidence-based research. The customized employment guide will be a readily available training tool for managers, social workers, contracted agencies, providers, and direct care staff in July 2012.

Discussion

Devoted energy and momentum has been focused toward more customized employment approaches for individuals with disabilities and mental illness. Ultimately, the goal is to increase employment rates, opportunities, wages, and quality of life for these individuals. Utilizing the customized employment approach is just one of the many "tools in the toolbox". As services and funding continue to shift, encouragement for the use of more natural supports and resources is also supported.

Customized employment is centered on:

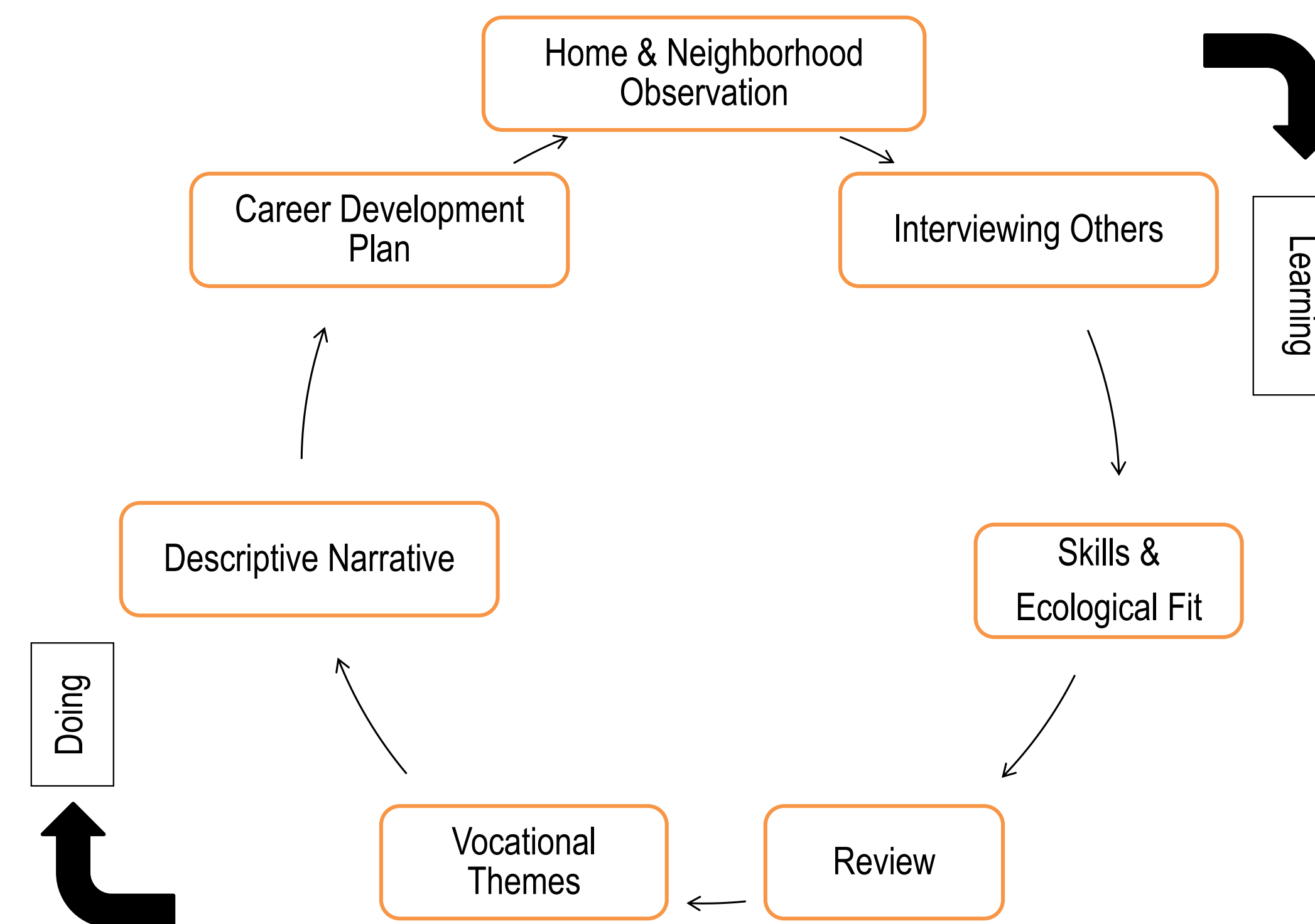
- Individual strengths, interests, abilities, and designed to meet the specific needs of the job seeker and the employer.
- A process that The Minnesota Training and Technical Assistance Center (MNTAT) (2012) calls Discovering Personal Genius (DPG).
- Helping individuals find and keep meaningful employment.
- Finding alternative approaches to traditional day programming.
- A framework of seven basic stages; within each tier there exists an array of tasks and observations that the individualized team takes into consideration.

Implications for Practice

Empowering clients, providing insight to individuals and communities, and evaluating policy and procedures are all part of the difficult 'paradigm shift' that is discussed by Orrin (1997) as one of the greatest challenges or implications to introduce new values and goals for organizational change with customized employment approaches.

- The customized employment guide is not exhaustive of all knowledge bases for successful customized employment.
- Further resources, training, and supplemental material will be needed.
- There is a demand for increased evidence-based research and quantitative findings to validate customized employment approaches.
- Barriers to employment for rural and small communities include lack of transportation, community stigma, job satisfaction, resources, and capacity (Beimers & Gatlin, 2011).
- Additionally, there is a lack of qualified professionals, "Fewer than three percent of all licensed social workers practice in rural areas" (Whitaker, Weismiller, & Clark, 2006, p. 14).

Discovering Personal Genius Process



Recommendations

The development and implementation of the customized employment guide and in-person training is intended to keep momentum for customized employment initiatives in Dakota County AS/CLS. In order to sustain this energy it is recommended that Dakota County AS/CLS utilize this guide and in-person training as a tool, reference, refresher, or for consultation. Keeping customized employment approaches at the forefront of service will help to make steps towards long-term strategic goals for increased employment numbers among those with disabilities and mental health issues, while remaining fiscally responsible in this evolving economy. It is anticipated that the guide will be utilized as an ongoing resource and support tool.

"Disability is a matter of perception. If you can do just one thing well, you're needed by someone."
-Martina Navratilova