
The Sunday Telegraph

\$3.00 • www.nashuatelegraph.com

SERVING GREATER NASHUA, N.H., SINCE OCT. 20, 1832

Vol. 187, No. 104 • Sunday, May 31, 2020

Maintaining mental wellness is a must in the workplace

By **GARY HOOPER**
Guest Columnist

Reflect for a moment on the emphasis of the importance of work within our society. When you meet someone new, what is one of the first things that you ask them? You ask them what they do for work. Work provides a sense of meaning and purpose, provides structure, promotes social integration, and provides financial means. Employment has been widely recognized as a fundamental part of a person's recovery. Approximately 60% of individuals diagnosed with a severe and persistent mental health condition express a desire to work. Many people experiencing a serious mental illness have in fact worked at some point in their lives. However, the unemployment rate for people with serious mental illness remains high. At the most basic level, this can be attributed to lack of self-confidence in their ability to work because of their disability, and fear of losing benefits that sustain

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their families. For others, due to gaps in their work histories or limited work histories, individuals struggle to compete with the other job candidates.

What is seen across community mental health centers is the diverse backgrounds that clients who are receiving our services come from. Mental illness does not discriminate. In fact, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) reports one out of five Americans will experience mental illness during their lifetime. Our clientele includes individuals who are college educated, people with experience in skilled labor, people with previous work histories from a va-

riety of business sectors, and people who never worked but have a strong desire to work. The community mental health centers across the state promote work as part of recovery and employ vocational specialists. Vocational specialists are trained in the evidenced-based practice called Supported Employment. The practice of Supported Employment applies a variety of supportive strategies to assist clients experiencing severe mental illness to obtain and maintain competitive employment.

Currently, at Greater Nashua Mental Health (GNMH) we have several individuals pursuing continuing education as part of their goal to pur-

sue a career. For others, it's about easing back into the workforce with a part-time job that pays competitive wages. In addition to supporting clients, vocational specialists, also known as Supported Employment Specialists, can serve as a resource to employers, providing on-the-job support, when needed. Greater Nashua Mental Health has a network of employers who have been satisfied with individuals they have hired through our agency as well as the support offered by GNMH Supported Employment Specialists.

As 2020 marks the agency having served the Greater Nashua area communities for 100 years, we are more determined than ever to be innovative and resourceful in order to continue to provide for those citizens in our region who have serious mental health disorders. Despite the current challenges faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Supported Employment team is still providing services,

temporarily using audio and video "telehealth" to continue their visits. Supported Employment Specialists continue to assist clients with developing resumes, preparing effectively for interviews, and navigating the filing process to register for unemployment benefits while out of work. In some cases, Supported Employment staff are even helping clients to start new employment in essential positions in the community. Supported Employment Specialists have ensured that clients are receiving services in order to maintain employment or manage their unemployment during these challenging times. Staff are also checking in with clients who are having difficulty coping with the pandemic itself. Monitoring and confirming that clients are managing their lives during these uncertain times is a team effort and the Supported Employment Specialists are vital members of those teams.

As we are living in a time of doubt and uncertainty as to how we should

conduct our lives while continuing to remain healthy and safe, those with serious mental illness are further impacted by these fear-provoking changes. The dislocation that many workers are currently feeling due to COVID-19 are feelings that many people with serious mental illness experience every day. It is essential that we support those who need help to obtain and maintain purposeful employment, as it is a necessary part of their recovery. Work is and always will be a cornerstone of everyone's identity and inclusion within our society. And in the Supported Employment program at Greater Nashua Mental Health, we believe that everyone should be given the opportunity to work.

To learn more about Supported Employment or any of our programs, visit www.gnmh.org, or call us at 603-889-6147.

Gary Hooper, BS, is the Supported Employment Services Coordinator for Greater Nashua Mental Health.



YOU ARE NEVER ALONE.

Phone: (603) 889-6147
24/7 Emergency: 1-800-762-8191
www.gnmh.org

We remain open and are safely providing services.

We have been serving our community for the past 100 years and we are looking forward to the next 100!

Responding to COVID-19 has put a strain on our resources. If you are able to assist us with a donation, we would greatly appreciate your help.

Please visit www.gnmh.org/donate.

Thank you!