

 **DHS News**  
Oregon Department of Human Services

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***Pilot produces impressive job gains for people with severe mental illness***

A three-year pilot program in five Oregon counties produced impressive results in helping people with severe mental illness to get and keep jobs, the Oregon Department of Human Services reported Monday.

The pilot, financed in part by a Johnson & Johnson Co. grant, used research-based practices that resulted in 45 percent of participants gaining employment.

“People with severe mental illness typically have a jobless rate of up to 90 percent,” said Bob Nikkel, administrator of the DHS Office of Mental Health and Addiction Services. “This shows how actively helping people with mental illness to join the workforce succeeds.”

The pilot operated in Douglas, Jackson, Josephine, Polk and Washington counties using \$180,000 in Johnson and Johnson grants and Dartmouth Community Mental Health Program research. Oregon was among seven states participating.

The so-called supported employment model integrates job-seeking and job-retention assistance with other mental health services instead of accepting unemployment or a sheltered-workshop assignment.

Nikkel said the criteria for successful placements included that the jobs must pay at least minimum wage and be available to any job-seeker.

A 62-year-old Douglas County man who hadn't worked in 30 years took a McDonald's job greeting customers and keeping the restaurant clean and stocked, and now has moved to a better apartment closer to his work. Another Douglas County man who had spent years in Oregon State Hospital took a break after a two-year stint as a dishwasher, and was hired back because the employer couldn't find anyone else as reliable and hard-working.

Another successful participant was a 45-year-old Jackson County resident with paranoid schizophrenia, unemployed for long periods, who has been a maintenance worker for an Ashland hotel for the past year. Another Jackson County resident, a 33-year-old woman who had been dependent on the community mental health system, took a cleaning job at Rogue Valley Mall, is saving for a car, preparing to take her driver test, managing her own money and hoping to live independently.

Nikkel praised employers for participating in the pilot program, saying they included department stores, gasoline stations, motels, grocery stores and fast-food restaurants.

"This goes to show that employers can benefit and that people who haven't had jobs before because of their mental illness can earn an income, improve their self-esteem and pay taxes," he said.

Within DHS, Nikkel's office and the DHS Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Services collaborated on the three-year project. Nikkel said DHS is exploring how to expand the pilot project's success to more Oregon counties.

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