

Dimensions of Success

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Executive Summary

This piece presents key dimensions of success for homeless, multiply diagnosed adult men and women with HIV/AIDS during their stay in Operation Link, a specialized emergency shelter offering a space to nurture the seeds of change. In an exploratory qualitative study, Link staff were asked to outline their views of client success. Among the central findings of this analysis were identifiable behaviors, some of them small but significant, which mark movement toward positive change and healthier life choices. The study results expand the definition of success beyond housing status and contribute toward the development of a behavior-anchored scale of client outcome.

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Shaping Operation LINK's Change Environment

Operation Link uses a strategy of progressive engagement for clients that were in need of services. This is accomplished through a low demand, non-punitive and non-judgmental stance toward service involvement and relapse. An important feature of Operation Link is recognizing that behavior change toward healthier life choices is incremental and non-linear, often marked by positive steps alternating with episodes of relapse. The staff of Operation Link encourage high levels of client personal choice, empowerment and self direction toward healthier life choices. The staff also provide on-going communication to clients as they struggle with the uncertainties of their movement toward change.

Key Dimensions of Client Success

Methods and Findings

In an effort to clarify what constitute success in an emergency shelter, Link staff were asked to identify the eight most and least successful Link clients. Using each group as a reference point, staff first independently identified key aspects of client success (Q: **What made Link clients most successful in their outcomes?**) Success was defined as deriving benefit from Link services. Staff then listed behaviors most likely to be seen in clients who did and did not benefit from Link services. (Q: **What kinds of things are you most likely to see in a client who is benefiting [or not benefiting] from Link, i.e., behaviors, attitudes etc.?**) Key themes and their related behaviors have been provided in quotes.

Expressed Desire for Change and Are Goal-Directed

Staff described successful clients as those who, on admission to Operation Link, espoused a desire to change a specific condition in their lives. Their goals were self-defined, i.e., named by the client prior to formal treatment planning sessions. Successful clients seem to demonstrate an ability to stay focused on these goals.

"They keep the negatives of the past in their minds but focused on moving ahead."

"They stay clear of people connected with the drug life, both in the shelter and outside the shelter."

"Successful clients complete their tasks and have a plan to do so."

"They do not object to or try to find ways around shelter rules."

"A successful Link client has a stated desire for change coupled with a determination to take actions to avoid what might move them away from their goals..."

"They really do not care; they just do enough to get by."

"They think that the world still owes them something, to get things for free..."

"...avoid responsibility"

Resilience

Successful clients show determination which seems to withstand challenges to their resolve. Their protective factors include humor, quick recovery from set backs and hopefulness in the face of disappointment.

"They gradually develop or regain a sense of humor."

"They are able to stay hopeful when things do not work out as planned."

"..If they do regress, they are faster at remedying the problems and do not fall back as far."

"They just seem to give up on themselves."

Use of Resources

Successful clients demonstrate a willingness and ability to accept opportunities to collaborate with others in attaining their goals. They also use services available to them.

"They make use of 12-step services at the shelter."

"They are open to constructive criticism offered by peers and staff."

"They seek and take suggestions from their peers, e.g., sharing information about strengths of local programs."

"...When they are afraid of failure, they ask for help or a listening ear."

"Some may only use the Link space as a place to sleep and not use its other resources..."

Interpersonal Skills/ Authenticity

The ability to be truthful and more authentic in relationships with staff and other clients is critical to success in recovery. Clients who demonstrate trust and reciprocity in relationships are perceived as demonstrating positive change behaviors.

"Their tolerance for lying decreases."

"They become less tolerant of the addict or dependent behavior of other clients."

"They feel shame when they are caught in deception rather than continuing to fabricate excuses."

"They return to staff for help, despite prior disagreements."

"They lie and deny that they are lying, regardless of the amount of evidence presented."

They continue to use drugs and lie about it, thereby undermining staff confidence in their stated goal of changing drug related behavior."

"They take advantage of their peers through theft and deceit."

Responsibility For Self Care

Successful clients assume responsibility for initiating and maintaining actions which lead toward their expressed goals.

"They are involved with learning about their medications."

"They take an interest in their appearance."

"...begin to see staff and fellow Linkers as family but gradually see other less successful clients as different from themselves."

"They are helpful to new residents."

"Maintaining responsibility of compliance"

"They attend voluntary community meetings and groups."

"Successful clients start to take care of their business—welfare, medications, appointments, food stamps—and take initiative in doing so."

"They continually test rules..try to get away with as much as they can."

"They do not engage with peers in maintaining their living space."

"Non-compliance (with medications)"

"...little or no real interest in maintaining education about the virus."

Building Community

Acceptance of the opportunity to engage with others—not based on utility of the other but rather on authentic engagement—distinguishes the successful Link client from others. These clients become more involved in the larger Link community to their own and the community's benefit.

"It's very important that you allow the client to know that they are people of the world in which we live....larger issues are addressed and families are proud to have their relationships back."

"At some point they begin to smile and recognize the possibility for a safe meeting with another human being..."

"These clients formed friendships with others trying to do positive things and they got a sponsor."

"Clients want to mend relationships with family members and regain trust."

"They provide staff with information about circumstances that undermine the program or their safety in the program."

Conclusions

Operation LINK developed a specialized emergency shelter program designed to meet the needs of the hardest-to-serve client, those with significant histories of homelessness, mental illness and/or substance abuse and diagnosed with HIV/AIDS as well. While it is essential to document outcomes of such unique programs, this exploratory study argues that traditional simple outcomes which examine only housing status are insufficient to document the actual progress made by these hardest-to-serve clients. The study suggests that success be redefined to include the measure of smaller incremental behaviors that signify, in this population, meaningful movement toward healthier life choices. Service providers are encouraged to recognize these smaller behavioral manifestations as indicators, in this population, that clients may be benefiting from their services, even if not yet permanently housed.

Future research can document behaviors that demonstrate success and progressive client engagement in working with homeless, multiply diagnosed persons with HIV/AIDS, many of whom continue to show patterns of instability in housing. This may well contribute to the development of a behavior- anchored scale in order to more effectively measure progressive engagement of this target population.

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