

## Can Disability Be Prevented?

**Working Well**, the Texas Demonstration to Maintain Independence and Employment (DMIE) is a research study that examines whether working people with significant health conditions can remain employed and independent if provided health benefits and employment services. This study, authorized by the federal Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999 (TWWIIA), provides an opportunity to intervene before working people with significant health problems become permanently disabled and dependent on federal programs such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). The study will provide data on health care use, employment outcomes, functioning, income and other factors which affect an individual's ability stay independent and working. This, the first in a series of briefs related to **Working Well**, will introduce the study, its goals, and potential for informing state and national health policy. Later briefs will examine participant characteristics and study outcomes.

## What is *Working Well*?

**Working Well** is a partnership between the State and the Harris County Hospital District (HCHD) – the fourth largest hospital district in the nation, which serves over 500,000 people each year. Participants in **Working Well** are working adults under age 60 enrolled in HCHD's “Gold Card” program, which provides discounted access to health care for Harris County residents. Like one in four Texans <sup>1</sup>, most study participants lack private health insurance. They are working people with:

- Severe mental illness (schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depression), or
- Other mental health or substance abuse conditions coupled with a significant physical health problem

Participants are randomly assigned into one of two groups:

- The control group, which receives services normally available through HCHD, or
- The intervention group, which receives case management, employment services, and has access to additional medical, dental, vision, mental health, and substance abuse treatment services.

The study will operate through September 2009. There is also some possibility that Congress may extend the study beyond that time frame.

# How Can *Working Well* Inform Public Policy?

Over 1,600 people are participating, making the Texas study one of the two largest in the nation. The Texas study offers an unprecedented opportunity to examine issues of interest to state and national policy makers. Some findings may challenge conventional anecdotal “wisdom”. Issues of interest include:

- What are the characteristics of uninsured working people with significant health conditions? What implications does this have for broader social policy? (For example, 14 percent of current Texas study participants are health care workers such as personal care attendants, facility aides, etc.)
- What factors cause working individuals with health conditions to lose independence? How do factors such as diagnosis affect behavior? (For example, baseline data indicates that people with severe mental illness have the same motivation to work as people with other health conditions.)
- What strategies are effective to enroll individuals in health benefits plans? Why? What implications might this have for health care reform initiatives that target the working poor? (Experience to date suggests that traditional marketing strategies may be less effective than enrollment at point-of-service in health clinics.)
- What strategies are effective in promoting continued independence and employment? How can these best be implemented?

*Working Well* is a randomized controlled field trial. The study will compare participants receiving interventions to a control group of similar people who do not get the interventions. *Working Well* interventions include employment services, health care (medical, dental, vision, mental health and substance abuse treatment services) and case management to help participants meet their health and employment goals.

*Working Well* is sponsored by a grant from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and is administered by the Texas Department of State Health Services. The project is operated at the local level by the Harris County Hospital District. The University of Texas at Austin Center for Social Work Research is the independent evaluator. For more information, contact the State Project Director, Dena Stoner at [Dena.Stoner@dshs.state.tx.us](mailto:Dena.Stoner@dshs.state.tx.us).

Visit our website at <http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/mhsa/workingwell>

Coming Next: **How Working Well Participants Compare with People on Disability**

## References

1. Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2006, U.S. Census Bureau. Available at: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2007pubs/p60-233.pdf>