

PROGRAM PROFILE

IKRON, Ohio

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IKRON is a community mental health agency that provides integrated substance use treatment and recovery services, Individual Placement and Support (IPS) and other employment services, and mental health services to individuals with substance use disorder (SUD), mental illness, or physical disabilities.¹ This profile describes IKRON's approach to integrating employment services in its treatment and recovery programs for people with SUD, along with lessons and insights shared by leaders and practitioners.

This profile was developed as part of a descriptive study of programs that offer employment services to people with SUD; the study was part of the Building Evidence on Employment Strategies (BEES) Project, funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families, within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The profile draws on interviews with program administrators and selected staff members conducted during the summer of 2020. For quick facts on IKRON, see Box 1.²

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

IKRON provides integrated recovery and employment services through an individual service plan developed for each person based on that person's needs, recovery goals, and employment interests. Services are provided to all with a barrier to and interest in employment, regardless of income or diagnosis. Services can include:

- **Treatment and recovery services:** intensive outpatient treatment, individual therapy and recovery counseling sessions, group support meetings, and limited medication for opioid use disorder (MOUD)
- **Employment services:** IPS, as well as occupational training and educational support to earn a high school equivalency credential

- **Support services:** assistance in gaining access to public benefits and other services to address barriers to employment

Employment services staff members work with participants to determine the appropriate program activities, sequence, and timeline for completing them. Support from IKRON is available for at least 90 days beyond employment placement.



LOCAL CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

According to program staff members, the demographics of IKRON participants resemble the demographics of the area IKRON serves in southwestern Ohio near the Kentucky border. Most people in the area have low incomes, and most have less than a college-level education. About half have been involved with the criminal legal system; of that group, about 40 percent have a drug-related charge. Staff members report that more than 60 percent of IKRON participants have children; of those with children under 18, about 40 percent are involved with the child welfare system.³

IKRON sees participants facing a range of substance use disorders, including those involving alcohol, marijuana, prescription opioids, heroin, and cocaine. Most participants in the IPS program have mental health conditions in addition to substance use disorder. Those participants have often been referred by the state vocational rehabilitation agency, which funds their care.⁴



SUD TREATMENT AND RECOVERY SERVICES

IKRON provides an intensive, outpatient treatment group, individual therapy and recovery counseling sessions, and ongoing group and peer support meetings. IKRON and a partner organization also offer MOUD.

Box 1. IKRON: Quick Facts

PROGRAM:	IKRON
LOCATION:	Cincinnati, OH
IMPLEMENTING ORGANIZATION:	IKRON
PARTICIPANTS SERVED PER YEAR:	1,100 total, 840 in the IPS program
SERVICES:	Intensive outpatient services, individual therapy, group support meetings, Individual Placement and Support (IPS), educational support, support services
STAFFING:	31 full-time equivalent staff members for the supported employment program

- **Intensive, outpatient treatment group.** IKRON offers this service on weekdays for three hours each day, and most people attend three days a week. The curriculum is designed to address a broad array of issues in addition to SUD, such as finding housing and employment. It lasts 12 to 16 weeks, but can be shortened as appropriate depending on the group's composition and needs. Most who attend intensive, outpatient treatment also receive an additional service from IKRON, such as occupational training or group therapy.
- **Individual therapy and recovery counseling sessions.** IKRON offers addiction-specific therapy and counseling services, which participants typically attend for one hour a week. The services are designed to be flexible; IKRON offers evening hours and lets participants attend more or less frequently, as necessary. There is also no set number of weeks for these services, so people who enroll in therapy can stay for as long as they choose.
- **Ongoing group and peer support.** IKRON organizes weekly, hour-long group meetings to support participants in multiple stages of recovery: prerecovery groups, a women's group, a men's group, a cognitive behavioral group, and a relapse-prevention group, among others. There are also two peer-operated services at the IKRON facility: the Warmline, a support hotline; and the Mighty Vine Wellness Club, which offers af-

fordable gym and fitness services by and for people with mental health issues.

- **MOUD.** Participants typically come in already connected with MOUD providers. If someone needs a MOUD provider, however, IKRON has one nurse practitioner on staff who can provide dosing, or IKRON will refer the person to a separate walk-in clinic inside the building, run by a partner organization, that has more staffing available for MOUD services.

Staff members report that IKRON aims to help participants balance their schedules between treatment and recovery services and employment services. Participants can make use of IKRON's services in any order, and IKRON does not require someone to have successfully completed any element before beginning another.

**EMPLOYMENT SERVICES**

IKRON's primary employment service is the IPS model (encompassing job-readiness, job placement, and job-retention services), although it also provides occupational training and education, primarily assistance in obtaining a high school equivalency credential.

IKRON's IPS services begin with an initial meeting to fill out a detailed job-development plan that is used to create a profile of a participant's desired career. The staff can then immediately start assisting the participant in finding employment, by offering the following services:

- **Job-readiness services.** Staff members help participants create résumés and develop interview skills. They also work with participants on professional workplace behavior; email, phone, and voicemail etiquette; and networking skills.
- **Job placement services.** Staff members find participants jobs through direct employer contacts, job boards, and email lists. IKRON also educates employers about the benefits of employing someone with a physical or mental health condition and helps them envision what it would take to do so.
- **Job-retention services.** The level and duration of the retention services IKRON provides are up to the participant. Typically, the job developer will be in contact with the participant at least weekly for the first 60 days and will try to transition to less frequent contact over the next 30 days.⁵ The job developer will stay in contact for a minimum of 90 days, to be extended for as long as necessary. Counseling sessions and the relapse-prevention group, which IKRON considers to be important job-retention services, can also continue indefinitely. If an issue arises with a participant's work performance, no matter how long the participant has been successfully employed, the job developer will make contact with the employer (as long as the participant has signed a release allowing this contact).
- **Training services.** Anyone enrolled in IKRON has the option to obtain professional certifications related to, for example, food handling or construction safety. Participants can start studying for these certification exams, with staff assistance, at any point; they do not have to wait to have a high school equivalency or hit any other milestone in their recovery or job search process. Some may need one-on-one instruction or to have questions read to them, while others are ready to take the exam the day they start at IKRON.
- **Educational services.** IKRON provides educational services to supported-employment participants who are interested in taking the GED or other high school equivalency exams. It periodically reassesses participants with different practice exams until the education team feels they are ready for the test. IKRON refers people who need more intensive and personalized support to Cincinnati Public Schools' adult education division.

For those with SUD, IKRON adapts employment services in several ways. It helps identify jobs or positions that are not triggering (for example, participants may not want to be in specific areas of town based on their substance use histories, or may not want to work in environments where alcohol is present) and for which participants have the best chance of securing employment. Staff members also talk with participants about the pros and cons of disclosing substance use history (including any associated criminal records) to employers. IKRON helps participants receiving MOUD understand they can still pass drug screens with proof of prescription, and helps them negotiate work schedules with breaks for treatment.



SUPPORT SERVICES

Like IKRON's other services, support services are tailored to individuals' needs. When a participant starts, IKRON conducts a needs assessment. Staff members then work to connect the participant with other resources in the community and help the person navigate the eligibility-verification processes associated with those resources. Staff members continue meeting weekly with the participant as long as needed. Staff members report that most commonly, people need help securing housing, getting food, developing budgets, and developing a supportive community. They may help participants enroll in public benefits, connect them to housing, help them understand how working may affect their benefits, help them expunge their legal records, connect them with childcare assistance, or help them develop budgets to manage their income and expenses.

PARTNERS

IKRON provides a full spectrum of services and has stable funding, and therefore does not rely on partners for major service components or funding collaborations. It does have partnerships with Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities, the state vocational rehabilitation agency that oversees local IPS programs, and the Health Resources Center, which is located inside the IKRON building and provides substance use treatment.

FUNDING SOURCES

IKRON's main funding source is the state vocational rehabilitation agency, Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities. It also receives local funding for IPS services from the Hamilton County

Mental Health Services Board, the Mental Health Addiction Board, the City of Cincinnati, and Hamilton County.



STAFF REFLECTIONS

IKRON's approach is to make a priority of individuals' needs and tailor services to meet those needs. Staff members shared two things that make that approach possible:

- **Emphasizing staff support and retention.** It takes expertise, time, and energy to tailor services to the needs of individuals, and IKRON staff members reported that they had all three because of the organization's high rate of staff retention and its staff members' commitment to the organization's mission. Staff members and managers said consistently that the organization felt like a family because of the longevity and dedication of the staff.
- **Giving staff members the time they need to coordinate tailored, cohesive services.** IKRON staff members reported that their weekly staff meetings provide an important forum for discussing the many, interconnected challenges participants face. The integration of recovery and employment services is part of IKRON's approach: Anyone for whom those two goals are a priority gets an individually customized service mix.

The main challenge IKRON has faced is a lack of funding for some support services (such as housing, transportation, and childcare) and for job-retention support beyond 90 days of employment. The organization has secured long-term, stable funding for IPS, but has had more difficulty in developing relationships to get supportive services for participants and in allocating time so that staff members can provide follow-up services while still attending to a caseload of active participants.

SNAPSHOT GRAPHIC




Figure 1 summarizes IKRON's services.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 For more on IPS, see Sam Elkin and Lily Freedman, *Individual Placement and Support: Background and Directions for Future Research*, OPRE Report 2020-139 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020).
- 2 Box 1 gives staff sizes in full-time equivalents. Full-time equivalents indicate the number of full-time employees at an organization plus the number of part-time employees, standardized to a full-time basis. For example, an organization with 4 full-time and 3 half-time employees would have 5.5 full-time equivalents.
- 3 The child welfare system responds in cases of alleged child abuse and neglect.
- 4 The vocational rehabilitation system "provides services for individuals with disabilities, consistent with their strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interests, and informed choice, so that they may prepare for and engage in competitive integrated employment or supported employment and achieve economic self-sufficiency." See Rehabilitation Services Administration, "State Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program" (website: <https://rsa.ed.gov/about/programs/vocational-rehabilitation-state-grants>, n.d., accessed on December 13, 2021).
- 5 Job developers focus on moving people into employment by working with employers to identify their needs.

Figure 1. Snapshot of Services in IKRON's Treatment and Recovery Programs

Because IKRON's services are tailored to the individual, participants can receive them in any order, on whatever timeline makes sense for their needs.

	Activity	Description
TREATMENT AND RECOVERY SERVICES 	Medication for opioid use disorder	Provided by IKRON or a partner
	Intensive outpatient treatment	Three hours a day, five days a week
	Individual therapy and recovery counseling sessions	Addiction-specific therapy and counseling services to individuals one hour a week
	Support meetings (group and peer)	Prerecovery group (1.5 hours/week) Cognitive behavioral therapy group (1 hour/week) Women's/men's group (1 hour/week) Relapse-prevention group (1 hour/week)
SUPPORTIVE SERVICES 	Individually tailored support	A needs assessment, followed by help securing housing, getting food, developing a budget, connecting with transportation, finding childcare, and developing a supportive recovery community
EMPLOYMENT SERVICES 	Education	Help preparing for the GED or other high school equivalency exams
	Training services	Certifications for food handling safety and construction safety
	Job-preparation services	Job-readiness assistance and help crafting a substance use communication plan (to discuss substance use history, medication for opioid use disorder, etc.)
	Job search help	Placements in competitive positions with local employers, including help identifying positions that will not induce relapse
	Job-retention support	Weekly check-ins during the first 60 days of employment, followed by less frequent contact over the next 30 days. Staff members may also speak to employers and provide on-site support if needed.

SOURCE: Interviews with IKRON leaders and staff members conducted between June and August of 2020.