

Moving Forward, Together:

Next Steps

One of the ongoing tensions in the integration process is to balance the need for more time against dwindling resources and mandates to do more with less. It is striking how isolated providers of homeless services are from one another and how strong the desires are to foster networks to exchange ideas and share lessons learned. As people with experiences of homelessness integrate into service delivery environments, the need for technical assistance to help organizations negotiate those cultural shifts will increase. Face-to-face regional forums, teleconferences, and other forms of technical assistance are necessary to provide opportunities for cross-training, generate dialogue, and energize those individuals poised to take next steps toward consumer integration.

Future technical assistance forums will need to address some areas of concern. As more agencies embrace the promise of recovery and search for new ways to fulfill that promise, these agencies need to increase the number and range of roles consumers play in organizations, including: (a) negotiating multiple or conflicting role expectations; (b) exploring how consumers can decrease isolation and increase natural supports in role transition; (c) maintaining identity while working in service delivery; (d) increasing opportunities for leadership roles in organizations; (e) addressing tension between consumers disclosing their experiences and those who choose not to disclose; and (f) increasing funding sources to support workforce development and build capacity to involve consumers who are currently homeless or with more vulnerability.

Connecting to existing networks and generating new associations can foster innovative solutions and opportunities for sharing promising approaches to integration. A few ideas for strengthening partnerships are below.

A. Support a Network of Consumer Peer Providers

Over the last 20 years, a number of membership organizations developed to represent the interests of people who provide services and also received them at some time. Two examples from the field of mental health are: (1) the National Association of Consumer/Survivor Mental Health Administrators (NAC/SMHA), a membership organization of senior managers in State mental health departments who identify as recipients of services; and (2) the National Association of Peer Specialists (NAPS), a nonprofit organization with members in every State. Developing a local, regional, and national coalition of peer providers creates a base of support for peers working in the field, generates networking opportunities, and increases efficacy in advocacy, outreach, and coalition-building. Initial steps could include:

- Identify peer providers in local agencies, and offer space and transportation to allow peer providers to meet together.

- Sponsor liaisons from local and regional peer provider groups to attend national forums to meet and form a national coalition.

B. Build on the Momentum of Consumer-Driven Evaluation

Increasingly consumers act as independent researchers and create new ways to approach evidence through qualitative research methodologies and participatory action research, incorporating consumers into the process itself. The Well-Being Project (1986–1989) was a consumer-directed survey research project identifying factors that helped and hindered the well-being of consumers in California. It developed interview protocols, trained consumers as researchers, and conducted surveys with over 500 respondents (Campbell & Shraiber, 1989). More recently, a research team, the majority of whom had a diagnosis of mental illness, designed and managed the Recovery Oriented System Indicators (ROSI) Measure. The Measure is a product of collaborative efforts among the team, State mental health authorities, and others interested in developing mental health system performance indicators to measure mental health recovery (Onken, 2004).

- Identify training programs for consumers who want to learn about evaluation and actively participate in designing surveys, conducting interviews, and interpreting results. Some initiatives offered institutes in basic research language, instrument development, and participatory action research.
- Develop more positions for consumer evaluators.
- Build a resource library including the work of consumer evaluators such as Julia Tripp in Homeless Management Information Systems Research, Jonathan Delman, J.D., at Consumer Quality Initiatives, Jean Campbell, Ph.D., Steve Onken, Ph.D., Ruth Ralph, Ph.D., Jeanne DuMont, Ph.D., and others.

C. Initiate a Consumer-Led Multimedia Project

Providers and allies—rather than the people who share lived experiences—collect, copyright, and use consumer stories and interviews. Generating an initiative that uses multimedia formats to convey stories of struggle and triumph in the lives of peers providing services is a powerful way to reverse this trend. These interviews can become the foundation for future local, regional, and national training. They can also archive with other creative media (video, photography, fine arts, music, and poetry) to preserve the life stories of people who have experiences of homelessness.

Conclusion

As articulated by the President’s New Freedom Commission on Mental Health (2003), consumers and providers stand at the threshold of a new and exciting paradigm in the field of homelessness and mental health services: the shift to recovery-oriented, consumer-driven systems of care. Despite the challenges, consumers increasingly integrate in visible positions across a range of roles, breaking down stereotypes and demonstrating that recovery is possible for everyone. Paving the way for people with experiences of

homelessness to move from the margins to the center of the service delivery process is a difficult cultural shift to make, but one that promises to transform lives. This transformation is what makes *Moving Forward, Together* possible.

References

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