



Moving Forward, Together: Create a Range of Opportunities for Consumer Integration Step 3—Building Capacity in the Early Stages

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This section focuses on action steps to build capacity within organizations at the earliest stages of development. These steps include communicating to people with experiences of homelessness that their presence is vital and valued; designing thoughtful and detailed roles and job descriptions; and developing creative recruitment and advertising strategies in order to attract a diverse workforce.

A. Value Consumer Presence in Concrete Ways

Part of the transformation to a recovery-oriented system involves actively inviting people from the margins of society into the center of agencies and organizations as prominent agents in shaping change. Organizations can express the central importance of consumer input and maximize their participation in tangible ways:

- **Inform people that their presence at meetings is critical.**

One mental health agency in Massachusetts, working on an initiative to end the practices of seclusion and restraint, communicated to its consumer members that their participation was so vital that they would cancel meetings in their absence. This requirement had a powerful effect on everyone involved; the consumer members felt an increased sense of responsibility, accountability, and belief in their unique contributions, and the committee benefited from their input throughout the process.

- **Be aware of the “digital divide.”**

Much organizational business today takes place via e-mail and other technologies that may be out of reach for people with experiences of homelessness. To address this problem, one organization decided to develop a “signature” at the end of their e-mail discussion group, which included a list of people without access to e-mail, their telephone numbers, and best times to reach them to let them know about important meetings (with their express permission, of course). Another organization developed a telephone tree to let individuals without e-mail access know about meetings, events, and other gatherings of interest. In addition, many agencies provide people with phone cards so they can check in regularly with a contact person.

- **Ask consumers about their interests.**

Some ideas to build on:

drawing, painting, collage, printing, metal work, sculpture, pottery, leatherwork, sewing, weaving, embroidery, quilting, music, dance, drumming, writing, poetry, yoga, juggling, puppetry, stained glass, storytelling

If the agency has trouble with consistent attendance in agency activities, ask consumers what interests them. Request donated space for advisory board meetings and similar gatherings in community art, music, or dance studios, which can inspire people to attend. Rotate asking one person per meeting to share skills in any creative area for 15 minutes of the meeting. One agency developed a community art studio open to anyone in the community. Ninety-five percent of the artists have experiences of homelessness. They have mentors who teach workshops and studio assistants, as well. People come in to be safe and make connections with others. When people in the community begin interacting with formerly and currently

homeless individuals side by side, it counteracts stigma, breaks down barriers, and inspires relationships.

B. Clarify Roles and Expectations

Ironing out the details of roles and expectations prior to involving consumers maximizes the chances of success and minimizes the negative perceptions of consumers as “unpredictable.” When agencies create new positions, administrators and staff may not know what to “do” with the consumer’s skill set. This lack of clarity can be difficult for consumers and supervisors alike. Consumers may not understand expectations and supervisors can find it hard to evaluate their performance. Many people who are or were homeless are survivors of trauma, and this lack of clarity can feel like a replication of the chaos and uncertainty experienced on the street. Some ideas to create clarity in the development of roles include:

- Meet with administrative team members and consumers familiar with the agency to discuss various ideas for role innovations.
- Consider support and accommodations anticipated for these roles.
- Generate a detailed description that facilitates discussion about successful outcomes in the role through performance review. This description does not need to be formal, but could take the shape of weekly conversations, during which people discuss their progress with the role transition.
- Adapt roles as necessary.

C. Define Recruitment Strategies

One strategy agencies use in the early phases of implementing consumer involvement efforts is to begin recruiting people with experiences of homelessness as well as time in recovery from substance use and/or experience in the psychiatric self-help movement. The rationale for this approach is that consumers not currently experiencing homelessness and who have more time in recovery tend to be in better positions to pave the way for people with similar experiences to follow. There is a certain amount of stigma, stereotyping, and

subtle discrimination any minority group encounters when first breaking through cultural barriers, even in the best of organizational environments. Also, staff will face all the uncertainties of how to make adjustments to policy and practices in order to be supportive. Consumers with more social, physical, and recovery supports will have an easier time navigating new terrain, and agencies will more easily learn from the experience as well. Together, consumer providers and non-consumers can generate plans to recruit others into the environment once all have the chance to evaluate their experiences and share lessons learned.

Some of the strategies below are consistent with affirmative action policies used by organizations trying to become more diverse. Being intentional about involving people with experiences of homelessness can combat stigma and promote recovery through role modeling in the environment. Agencies provided the following tips regarding efforts to recruit consumers into a variety of roles:

- Establish a goal for involving a certain number of consumers.
- Set aside vacancies as they arise for people with lived experience.
- Design specific positions for consumers.
- Make it well known in the community that the values and practices of the agency are recovery-oriented and consumer-driven, so consumers are aware that they can continue their recovery while working within the agency.
- Recruit consumers from trainings and annual conferences organized by consumer-run agencies.
- Get referrals from local and national consumer organizations.
- Ask recovery and peer self-help groups, drop-in and other community center personnel, case managers, social workers, nurses, etc. for referrals.

D. Advertise in a Fun and Direct Way

There are many ways to advertise positions that will attract people with experiences of homelessness to the agency. A New York agency advertised in a fun way for an intervention specialist/peer bridger to work with people involved in the forensic system, illustrated in the shadow box. This kind of advertisement can easily adapt to recruit people who are or were homeless, adding the question, "Have you ever experienced homelessness?" The most common approach to advertising was to add a line to the advertisement reading, "lived experience with mental illness and homelessness is a plus" or "preferred" or "people with experiences in recovery are encouraged to apply."

*Newspaper Advertisement for
Intervention Specialist/Peer Bridger to
work with people in prison diagnosed with
mental illness:
"Have you ever been arrested?
Do you have a mental illness?
Are you a recovering addict? Alcoholic?
We want you to work for us!
Must be in recovery for at least 2
years...off probation at least 1
year...willing to travel within NYS...please
contact..."*