

KANSAS MENTAL HEALTH COALITION

.....Speaking with one voice to meet the critical needs of people with mental illness

The Need for Expanded Peer Support in Kansas

Position: Kansas should take steps to increase access to peer support programs across Kansas.

The Problem: In spite of the published research supporting its effectiveness, peer support services in Kansas are not widely available. Recovery is greatly improved when individuals have access to information and choices. Among those choices are peer support programs that connect people who are living in recovery from mental health crises with those who need the information to empower their own recovery. Programs include drop-in centers, self-help groups, consumer run organizations, education and advocacy organizations. Kansas should be moving forward with such programs, instead of reducing them.

According to a 2003 report from the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors, “participation in these services yields improvement in psychiatric symptoms and decreased hospitalization (Galanter, 1988; Kennedy, 1990; Kurtz, 1988)....In studies of persons dually diagnosed with serious mental illness and substance abuse, [peer support] was found to significantly reduce substance abuse, mental illness symptoms, and crisis” (Magura, Laudet, Rosenblum, & Knight, 2002).

“PSS (peer support services) represent a best-practice model of care for promoting hope and recovery, improved self-esteem and self-care, and increased resiliency and well-being. As these services expand and coverage requirements grow, these services require the same level of scrutiny and rigor as other types of care, including ongoing evaluation of effectiveness and of protocols and criteria for their use.” (Best Practices article conclusion by Daniels et al, Psychiatric Services, Dec 2013, Vol. 64 No. 12)

Why this matters: Peer support programs may serve as an alternative or complement to traditional mental health treatment options. These programs are often less expensive or can reduce the costs of accompanying traditional treatment -- such as hospitalization, medication or therapy. Research has shown that peer support programs reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety; encourage consumers to be more active participants in their care and treatment; and result in fewer hospital admissions.

The bottom line: Peer support works. Unfortunately, it is not available to many of the people who need it. As Kansas develops initiatives to improve behavioral health, peer support must be a part of those plans. This can be achieved through policies and procedures that increase access to peer support in the public behavioral health system, and through increased development of local and regional peer support organizations (often called consumer-run organizations, or CROs) designed to operate at the grass-roots level.

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The rest of the story about making complete recovery the standard practice in Kansas

- 1) More should be done to incorporate peer support services in Medicaid programs.** Peer support services are an expanding part of the continuum of care provided for behavioral health conditions, and are deemed an evidence based reimbursable model of care by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. States, counties, employers, and health plans are increasingly covering PSS in benefit plans. Controlled and experimental studies are building the evidence base for these services. Medicaid and the states have not developed level-of-care or medical necessity criteria for PSS, even though these criteria are standards for determining coverage and reimbursement. A strong peer support community would enhance the scope and effectiveness of health home partnerships (HHPs) as HHPs build their teams to serve people with mental illness and chronic health conditions.

- 2) Use prevention services instead of crisis-only services.** Mental health services are at their best when they are proactive and preventative, rather than reactive and crisis-oriented. This avoids a repeat of negative experiences such as hospitalization screening or law enforcement interventions. Such events can add to individuals' trauma. Up to 40% of people admitted to a mental hospital have never received any kind of peer support or community care, which would greatly lower treatment costs. Peer support centers like nationally recognized S.I.D.E. in Kansas City, KS, have carried this first contact burden through recent budget cuts. Increased resources available to peer support programs and consumer-run organizations across the state would replicate S.I.D.E.'s success on a broad scale.

- 3) Focus on recovery and wellness.** Over 60% of the early mortality of people with mental health diagnoses is due to preventable physical illness. Focusing on total body health, with choices made by each service recipient, greatly improves outcomes. HHP services are designed to focus on overall wellness, and to incorporate peer specialists as part of their teams. As people with lived experience of recovery, peer specialists are uniquely equipped to engage with consumers in this arena.

- 4) Let people know that emotional distress can be temporary and transformative. Peer support encourages hope by bringing people together who have been in similar circumstances.** There are many valid definitions of recovery, but "there is life and possibility beyond this experience" is still the most hopeful and encouraging. Let people meet mental health graduates and learn their methods. According to national advocate Duane Sherry, "Psychosis is an event, not a person." For people who have experienced symptoms of illness throughout the course of their life, peer supporters can help them discover unique strategies for self-determination within the context of pursuing their hopes and dreams. Pat Deegan describes this as helping people "live their life, not their diagnosis".

- 5) Peer Support programming provides choices.** Mental health medications and other traditional services can be effective, but should not be the only treatment option. Kansans deserve fully informed service use and the opportunity to develop strategies that work for them. Access to additional supportive services, including therapy and peer support, is the most effective way to achieve recovery. Individuals need the proper information in order to make proper choices about safe, supported and meticulously planned medication use or reduction strategies and to chart their course away from costly long-term interventions and toward a rich, self-determined life.