The Need for Expanded Peer Support in Kansas

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

**The Problem:** The future prosperity of Kansas depends on its ability to foster the health and wellbeing of people who go through emotional distress; this includes people who experience diagnosable mental illness. When a society invests wisely in its children, families, and people with disabilities, they can repay that investment through a lifetime of productivity and responsible citizenship. A robust and balanced array of mental health services is that wise investment.

Living with significant emotional distress can be compared to working on a table that has only 3 legs. Even when a person has all the things they need for a fulfilling, productive life, when trying to put them together on an uneven table, energy is wasted in keeping things on the table from slipping off, and some items may fall to the floor. Traditional mental health services (e.g., medication, therapy, and case management) generally comprise three essential legs of the table. The addition of peer support program adds the missing fourth leg needed to assure stability, levelness, and strength.

According to a 2003 report from the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors, “participation in [peer] 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).

Peer support also has the benefit of flexibility to address whole health and social determinants of mental and physical illnesses. Peers bring unique and personally tested strategies for obtaining and benefitting from medical and mental health care, social services, programs and community resources. Use of these strategies by Kansans with emotional distress and mental illness improves their overall health, reducing costly medical interventions and disability and increasing their ability to contribute meaningfully to our communities.

Peer support programs include much more than brick and mortar drop-in centers, self-help groups, consumer run organizations, advocacy groups, community health workers, respite care programs, recovery coaching, and peer led treatment for substance use conditions. Peer support encourages hope by bringing people together who have been in similar circumstances. These build a strong foundation in the early years of struggles so that there are much greater chances for positive outcomes. Kansas should be moving forward with such programs, instead of reducing them. We should support people who grew up with weak foundations so that they can pay back our society with increased productivity.

Neuroscientists are now reporting that certain kinds of stress in the environment can lead to mental health problems. One way to think about mental health is that it's like having to work on a three legged table. The table is uneven. Just like tables can't make themselves level, people need attention from peer supporters and others who understand levelness and stability.

“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.” (Best Practices article conclusion by Daniels et al, Psychiatric Services, Dec 2013, Vol. 64 No. 12) Peer support, a best practice, effectively provides the fourth leg of the table, leveling the surface so a person can build a full and effective life.

**Why this matters:** We know that recovery is greatly improved when individuals have access to
information and choices. Peer support programs may serve as an alternative or complement to traditional mental health treatment options which generally comprise the other three legs of the table. These programs are often less expensive or can reduce the costs of accompanying traditional treatment.

**The bottom line:** Peer support works and Kansas has many very creative and effective models that can heal toxic stress and repair and unbalance uneven foundations. These programs show significant long-term improvements for people.

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

1) Kansas can greatly increase it's prosperity by expanding, existing, and establishing peer support service in areas where they are not currently available. These help build future prosperity by adding productive people to the workforce. There are federal match dollars available from CCBHC grants, from HBCS waivers, from SAMHSA and HRSA, from the State Targeted Response Grants, and from federal workforce initiatives (compiled by NACBDD 2017). Kansas should access these programs to make the Kansas mental health workforce to be 25% peer providers within the next 10 years. (Ron Manderschied, NACHBDD). Kansas can restore peer specialist certification programs, peer support in health homes, and the full Medicaid reimbursement rates for peer providers. These programs create opportunity for all Kansans to work again instead of becoming disabled.

2) There are many valid definitions of recovery, but “there is life and possibility beyond this experience” is still the most hopeful and encouraging. Peer support might be like helping put back a leg onto a three legged table. It lets people meet mental health graduates and learn their methods.

3) 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. Kansas is full of innovative peer support programs that support recovery and wellness including nationally recognized S.I.D.E. in Kansas City, KS. Unfortunately, they do not exist in many parts of the state, or have been subject to budget cuts. Lots of people in Kansas know how to solve emotional distress and prevent early mortality of people with mental health diagnoses. Focusing on total body health, with choices made by each service recipient, greatly improves outcomes. Furthermore, whole health and value based funding are becoming the national model for health care. Kansans' peer support programs are recognized as national and international leaders.

4) 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.