

COMMUNITY INTEGRATION PROJECT

Introduction:

During 2007-2009, through a cooperative relationship between OMHSAS and the University of Pennsylvania Collaborative on Community Integration for People with Psychiatric Disabilities – a National Institute on Disability Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) funded research and training center – the UPenn Collaborative has worked in two settings to help county mental health officials, local provider agencies, and consumer groups to expand program commitments to community integration approaches.

Project Goal:

To assist consumers of mental health services to reconnect to their communities and to assess the barriers and supports for this process.

Snapshot of Outcomes:

Montgomery County:

The development of a local workgroup addressed the strained relationships between the Pottstown business community and local mental health agencies and resulted in 1) a strong working relationship between a performing arts center and a consumer drop-in center including plans for a drama presentation of consumers stories; and 2) mental health agencies “banking” and providing their volunteer resources to the community

Westmoreland County:

The development of a local workgroup addressed the low rates of consumer education and employment and resulted in “Operation Employment” which has produced 1) a guide to career opportunities and 2) training to promote employment at all levels of the system.

Discussion:

OMHSAS issued a call for proposals to the counties and Westmoreland and Montgomery Counties were selected to participate in the initiative.

- Westmoreland County. Westmoreland County established a goal of increasing the number of mental health consumers in the county who are either engaged in vocational rehabilitation activities or competitively employed. More specific objectives were defined by a local task force as: 1) increasing awareness and enthusiasm - among both casemanagers and consumers - about the value of work and the availability of vocational and educational programs focused on work outcomes; and 2) providing a series of resources and training programs that encouraged casemanagers and consumers to work collaboratively toward competitive employment outcomes. The project, and the local Operation Employment Task Force, was coordinated by Westmoreland Casemanagement Services, Inc. (Barbara Bruner / bbruner@wcsi.org).

- Montgomery County. Montgomery County established a goal of improving the potential for Mental Health consumers in the Pottstown areas to participate more comfortably in the life of the community. More specific objectives were defined by a local task force as: 1) increasing communication between key community groups (e.g., the local Chamber of Commerce, local political leaders) and the area's network of nonprofit mental health providers; and 2) developing opportunities – through volunteering, public relations initiatives, and civic projects, to increase positive contacts between individuals with serious mental illnesses and community members. The project was coordinated by the County MH Office (Nancy Weiman / nweiman@montcopa.pa).

Staff from the UPenn Collaborative met monthly with both groups over the 18 months, with intervening emails, conference calls, and related activities. UPenn personnel facilitated meetings, organized training programs, interfaced with community organizations on behalf of the group, and continues to offer technical assistance resources through the UPenn Collaborative.

Westmoreland County:

Westmoreland County Case Management Service, Inc. (WCSI) and the county office were clear from the outset that they wanted to focus on the issues surrounding education and employment for those with serious mental illnesses. Rates of engagement in education and employment were unacceptably low, and neither providers nor consumers seemed appropriately focused on addressing the degree to which this limited consumers' opportunities for community integration. WCSI put together a broadly representative task force – which then renamed itself 'Operation Employment' – with participation from the county office, WCSI half-a-dozen nonprofit provider agencies active in employment in the county, peer specialists from around the county, local family groups, and both the local Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and the local CareerLink facility.

In the first year of activity, Operation Employment undertook three sets of activities – each led by a separate subcommittee and each successfully completed: a) a guidebook to local vocational rehabilitation and career training opportunities was developed as an aide to casemanagers, consumers, and family members; b) WCSI completed a survey of its consumers to assess their interests in educational and employment opportunities, with survey results indicating very strong motivation for progress in this arena; and c) the Task Force sponsored a series of workshops, seminars, and other learning opportunities that focused on educational and employment opportunities as part of Mental Health Month.

In the second year of activity, Operation Employment focused on developing a three-day training series – for both casemanagers and consumers throughout the county – that focused on various aspects of career training and employment opportunities. With presentations from UPenn Collaborative personnel, OVR and CareerLink representatives, areas employers and educational institutions, local employment nonprofits, and others, each day provided exposure to resources and perspectives that both consumers and the casemanagers found informative and helpful. Of particular importance was the decision by the group to include in each day's training presentations from a panel of consumers who were currently working – describing their recovery journeys, the importance they have attached to work, their current positions and future prospects.

Montgomery County:

In Montgomery County, the Mental Health Office asked the project to improve communications between local community mental health agencies in Pottstown and those responsible for the business development of the town's commercial corridor and its residential expansion.

A planning group that consisted of a representative from the County MH Office, half-a-dozen nonprofit provider agencies in the area, the local NAMI chapter, and a representative of the consumer drop-in program, has been meeting regularly to grapple with a range of related issues. Initially, discussion centered on the sense among the group's participants that their agencies and the consumers they serve have been seen as a troubling presence on the main commercial street (High Street), with the potential of diminishing prospects for the town's businesses and limiting its residential revitalization potential. Much of the concern over these issues had appeared in the local press.

The project began by exploring ways to reduce these tensions, which consisted of several efforts: a meeting between the group's leadership and the redevelopment office; presentations by both academic and redevelopment leaders about the origins and possible solutions to these problems; and a range of outreach efforts to connect the mental health consumers in the town to the rest of the community. The group also sponsored a survey of consumers seeking information on the nature of consumer interactions with community groups that proved both that connections are fairly infrequent and often, when they do occur, based on attendance at religious services.

In the second year, the Pottstown group: a) facilitated a strong working relationship between a newly-opened Performing Arts Center and its two-doors-down neighbor, the Pottstown Consumer Drop-In Center. (The PAC was worried about the potential downside of consumers hanging out of the street, panhandling PAC visitors, and presenting a generally threatening atmosphere. Meetings between the two organizations provided a framework for ongoing discussion: today, the PAC draws on Consumer Center volunteers, and is working with the Consumer Center on a dramatic presentation that would capture the 'stories' of consumers in the town.); b) the development of a volunteer resource bank, operated by the consumer center but with all of the mh agencies participating, to offer consumer-based volunteer services to individuals and organizations in the town; and establishment of a Speakers' Bureau and public education campaign. For the rest of the year, the UPenn Collaborative and the County will be working on providing a framework for the county's various consumer centers to work together on community integration issues.

Learnings:

The Community Integration Project has been successful – in these two settings – in helping two communities address specific aspects of the community integration challenge: in Westmoreland County, continued efforts to promote education and employment will form the framework for continued collaborative efforts; in Pottstown, leadership has emerged from within the group to sustain ongoing community integration activities.

Progress has been steady in both settings, but slow. Translating community integration theory into practice faces a variety of financial, attitudinal, and practical barriers that require continued attention, but have the potential – as in these settings – of strong benefits for programs and consumers.

For More Information:

If you would like to learn more about the Community Integration Initiative, please contact Westmoreland or Montgomery County directly at the above e-mail addresses. For more information about the Community Integration Project at the University of Pennsylvania Collaborative on Community Integration, please contact Richard Baron at BaronRC@mail.med.UPenn.edu