

PEER SUPPORT SPECIALISTS

Using the Experience of People to Compliment the Recovery Process in the Behavioral Health Treatment World

By Linda Pauley

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CARE IN WEST VIRGINIA

West Virginia will soon have a problem with staffing behavioral health centers. The senior staff members are reaching retirement age. The pool of young professionals is decreasing as the amount of education required leads to costs that are hard to recoup after entering the workforce. Present clinicians and support staff work very hard delivering care to the steady flow of clients. In the next few years there will be an overload of people needing care.

The state had an estimated rural population of over 820,000 in 2010 according to the United States Department of Agriculture – Economic Research Service. This group of individuals lives in areas that may require lengthy trips to reach health care of any type. This can become more difficult for behavioral health services. There are fourteen centers located in cities. Some centers have satellite offices in smaller towns in the counties they serve. There are not a lot of community services available. Care is mostly non-existent in outlying regions.

Mental Illness and Substance Abuse can bring about lost productivity and unemployment. Those in recovery have skills and experience but find it hard to move into satisfying jobs. Studies showed that in 2007 individuals with mental health issues annually earned \$16,000 less than the general population. The cost of health care increases as this group uses emergency rooms for everyday health care due to lack of health insurance. Many need financial help to maintain a daily existence.

SHARING RECOVERY

Alcoholics Anonymous has offered support for recovery for over 75 years. Using a support system of people who have remained in recovery for a period of time along with a written plan to follow enabled many to overcome their need for another drink for another day. The mental health system has found that such a support system of people who have lived experience works for their patients as well. It is now a given that recovery from mental illness as well as addiction is possible. It is also known that sharing your recovery story strengthens your wellness.

The behavioral health system has found that many people in recovery who are willing to share their experiences and offer support to others are capable of working in the treatment system. They provide an expertise that cannot be replicated by education alone. This group models the fact that “Recovery is Possible.”

Utilizing behavioral health services does not negate a person’s intelligence, skills, talents or personal strength. If specialized training and certification are offered to those who wish to share their recovery, a new group of capable people can be added to the workforce. They can fill a number of positions in the centers that the clinical staff does not have time to cover. Studies show that adding them to treatment teams can reduce the number of people who miss appointments. This type of contact along with clinical help can lessen the number of times a person needs inpatient services. Research suggests that peer-delivered services produce increased social networks, lower levels of worry, and improved satisfaction with life. Each of these events offers savings of treatment dollars.

PEER SUPPORT SPECIALISTS

Over thirty states have initiated special training programs and certification processes to bring a new line of paraprofessionals into the behavioral health service system – Peer Support Specialists. Each state has developed a standard of training and certification for this position.

Basic requirements to attend trainings:

- ✓ Have lived experience with a mental illness and/ or addiction
- ✓ Have moved into a position of recovery
- ✓ Be willing to share their story

The jobs that are done by Peer Support Specialists are numerous. They work in clinical settings leading groups, doing individual peer support, offering educational classes, helping people find community resources, working on ACT teams, manning warm lines, and just being there to listen. They also provide support in peer-operated drop-in centers, emergency rooms, crisis centers, and state hospitals. Because they can take the training and return to their communities, there can be service available in rural areas with a small amount of funding from the current provider system.

Peer Support Specialists add new dimensions to the current service array.

- ✓ Work with patients as equals
- ✓ Move care out into community settings
- ✓ Give professional staff more time to deal with high end treatment scenarios
- ✓ Empower clients to take more responsibility for their care
- ✓ Educate consumers on the fact that mental illness and/or addiction is only one part of their life
- ✓ Offer support and education to family and friends of client
- ✓ Develop good work relationships with clinical staff

HIRING AGENCY

An agency contemplating adding Peer Support Specialists to their workforce will find it an advantage to designate one person to oversee the employment program. The company may need to re-assess their mission and values to ensure that it is an environment where recovery is the goal of the treatment services. It can make integration go smoother if a training program is set up for administrators and staff members in the perspectives of recovery, the role of peer support in programs, and an overview of the job descriptions that will be used for the positions held by peers. There will need to be an open discussion of supervision and personal challenges associated with bringing Peer Support Specialists into the workplace.

PAYMENT FOR PEERS

CMS issued a letter in 2007 encouraging state Medicaid offices to consider funding codes for work performed by Certified Peer Support Specialists. Twenty-two states use Medicaid reimbursement and eight others plan to seek coverage in the next year. Discussions need to be arranged with private insurers to give them information on this program so they can consider funding these services. There is still some peer programming that is not covered under Medicaid. This must be handled with state money. The average rate across the states using Peer Support Specialists is \$10 per fifteen minutes of service.

MOVING AHEAD

West Virginia is in the process of implementing a standard training program for Peer Support Specialists. It is working with stakeholders to develop a certification process for program graduates. Adding peers to treatment programs will add a new perspective to the recovery of mental illness and addiction in our state. Meetings need to be scheduled with officials and stakeholders to discuss funding issues around these new Behavioral Health workers.

There are many people in the State who would benefit from the development of this class of Behavioral Health worker. It would provide good jobs to those who want to train and seek certification. Consumers seeking services will appreciate more people to take care of their needs.