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Certified Peer Specialists Help Others in Recovery

Peer Supports have existed in the mental health field for decades in informal settings like clubhouses, drop-in centers, and consumer run organizations. Since the 1990's, there has been an increasing awareness and acknowledgement of the importance and value of consumers as providers of mental health services. In 2007, the Minnesota Legislature instructed the Commissioner of Human Services to establish a Medicaid-covered Certified Peer Specialist role. Minnesota is now one of 26 states that have a covered peer support service.

The concept of hiring someone that has a serious mental illness, someone that has or is receiving mental health services, brought forth many questions. Won't there be issues and problems relating to confidentiality and boundaries? What if they become ill and are not able to work? These questions and many more brought forth honest and sincere skepticism about adding these new employees to our program. Staff within our agency had many serious conversations, and still do, about these issues and work to address them in a professional and honest way. There are still bumps and trouble spots, but the value these new roles have brought to the agency and the services provided have been well worth those challenges.

In 2010, South Central Human Relations Center hired their first Certified Peer Specialist. SCHRC now employees three Certified Peer Specialists. One is working as a member of the Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) team. One is working as a team member at Safe Harbour, an Intensive Rehabilitation Treatment service (IRTS). And one is employed as a member of the Adult Rehabilitative Mental Health Services (ARMHS) program. All three have completed the very challenging certification process to become a Certified Peer Specialist in the State of Minnesota. Besides this, they have each received the training required of all new SCHRC staff on Data Privacy and Confidentiality guidelines. Each has also been trained by the specific program they are hired within.

The Value of Certified Peer Specialists

SCHRC has found many valuable contributions made by the Peer Specialists. They help people that are reluctant to engage in services, become more willing to access help. They can say to someone, "I have struggled too, and I have gotten better." As role models, they can be a great source of hopefulness. This hope that they convey is very powerful. They are living examples that recovery is possible.

Individuals that are struggling with their mental health, often know that others who don't have that illness really can't relate to their challenges in the same way. A professional that has never suffered with depression, for example, does not have the same credibility when they say to a depressed client, "I know how hard it is." Yet that same statement made by someone that has been hospitalized with that illness, lost jobs, or relationships because of that illness, has much more power and believability when they say to someone, "I know how hard it is." And then they can also say, "And you can get better."

A Certified Peer Specialist has a unique ability to create healing connections and relationships quickly. It is their willingness to share their own struggles with the illness, to be honest about how hard the challenges are and what barriers they themselves were faced with that gives them real credence. Sharing their firsthand knowledge about accessing help and services can be extremely beneficial to people, especially those that do not believe that accessing services will make much difference.

A Certified Peer Specialist's role in working directly with people that have a mental illness is important, but a more subtle, but not less important role they play, is part of a treatment team and within an organization.

Having a Certified Peer Specialist as part of a treatment team ensures that the special knowledge and insight of someone that has received such services is heard. They offer a perspective that is priceless. They do not diminish the role and expertise of the professionals on the team, on the contrary, they enhance it. The Certified Peer Specialist's engagement and trust with a new client can make the services offered by the other members of the team more acceptable and increases client engagement. It takes the clinical services offered by the other team members and enhances it with hopefulness.

Certified peer Specialists can offer feedback to team members and help them see situations from the client's perspective.

Employing Certified Peer Specialists can also enhance an overall agency's recovery culture. That is to say that their existence and integration into the operations and culture of the agency, keeps everyone focused on the need to have a recovery focus, to give all recipients of services the best opportunity for recovery and ensures that we see that recovery potential in everyone.

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