

The Voice

The Newsletter of NAMI Southwestern Pennsylvania

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Letter From The President

This edition of The Voice features a discussion regarding certified peer specialists as well as other very important information-packed articles. The vision of recovery holds out the hope and expectation that people who experience mental illness can and should have the same lives that we all strive for — a quality place to live, employment that helps us have a sense of purpose and relationships that help us know that we are loved and cared about in our journey through life.

As the CEO of Torrance State Hospital, as well as a family member of several persons who have been diagnosed with serious and persistent mental illness, I am very aware of the power of people working together to increase knowledge, combat stigma and strive for recovery. Recovery can and does happen! Unfortunately barriers to recovery continue to exist. It is only by working together as individuals living with mental illnesses, family members and mental health professionals can we overcome these barriers and advocate for true recovery based treatments and supports.

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Recovery is a self-determined and holistic journey that people undertake to heal and grow. Recovery is facilitated by relationships and environments that provide hope, empowerment, choices and opportunities that promote people reaching their fullest potential as individuals and community members. ¹

An Essential Component of Recovery:

Certified Peer Specialists — Who are they and how can they enhance the transformation to a recovery based behavioral health system?

Certified Peer Specialists (CPS) are part of the shift that is taking place in the Mental Health System from one that focuses on an individual's illness to one that focuses on an individual's strengths. A natural outgrowth of the 1999 Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health and the 2001 President's New Freedom Commission recommendations citing Recovery as the goal of a transformed system; the realization of the value of peer-to-peer support in this quest for recovery has occurred. Research and outcomes have shown that Certified Peer Specialists have an opportunity to provide hope to every consumer they serve — by putting a face on recovery — moving the recovery concept from a philosophy to a reality.

Recovery is no longer only about what clinicians do to consumers — it has become, with the assistance of Certified Peer Specialists, what consumers do for themselves and each other. Thus, Certified Peer Specialists are trained to assist consumers in skills building, goal setting, problem solving, conducting Recovery Dialogues, setting up and sustaining mutual self-help groups, and in helping consumers build their own self-directed recovery tools, including Wellness Recovery Action Plans.

As the recovery definition above notes, recovery is facilitated by relationships. Peer Specialists possess skills unique to their shared journey towards their personal recovery from mental illness. As NAMI members know, the connection with folks who have been there, who have walked in our shoes, hastens the development of relationships that can provide hope. So it is with Peer Specialists and their connection with others who are consumers of behavioral health services.

A person who is or has been a recipient of mental health services and meets mental health professional qualifications may hold the position of a Peer Specialist. Because of their life experience with mental illness and mental health services, the peer specialists provide expertise that professional training alone cannot

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replicate. Peer specialists are fully integrated team members who provide highly individualized services in the community and promote client self-determination and decision-making. Peer specialists also provide essential expertise and consultation to the entire team to promote a culture in which each consumer's point of view and preferences are recognized, understood, respected, and integrated into treatment, rehabilitation, and community self-help activities.

The programs themselves determine the professional qualifications required of Peer Specialists. Outcome studies have indicated it is beneficial for the peer specialist to have prior paid or volunteer work experience with adults living with mental illnesses. Well-established programs indicate that the successful Peer Specialist will have the self-knowledge to manage their personal recovery and be well along in the recovery journey. Having experienced a severe mental illness, the peer specialist has the unique ability to assist the other members of the treatment team to understand the consumer's perspective.

The goal of a Peer Specialist as defined by Beth Fillson, project manager-peer specialist project, within the Georgia Mental Health System, (a state that pioneered the provision of peer support): "To know the whole person in his or her whole context — to understand that sometimes the diagnosis cannot explain the pain. To make a clear distinction between services that cause us to linger and services that cause us to figure out how to do this thing called living."

Principle Duties and Responsibilities of a CPS

Typically Certified Peer Specialists carry out duties as a member of the treatment team, under the direction of the team leader and the team psychiatrist. Specific job responsibilities will vary depending on the education and experience of the individual peer specialist, and may include:

- Participate in comprehensive assessment of psychiatric history.
- Consult with community agencies and organizations, including consumer run programs such as self-help groups and consumer drop-in centers.
- Participate in daily staff organizational meetings and treatment planning review meetings.
- Contribute to the team's ongoing assessment of an individual's symptom management and response to treatment.
- Teach symptom-management techniques and promote personal growth and development.

- Provide work-related supportive services.
- Provide practical help and mentoring, advocacy, coordination, and side-by-side individualized support.

Pennsylvania Progress Update on the Peer Specialist Program

In Pennsylvania, the Certified Peer Specialist (CPS) Program was developed through a federal grant from The Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). The Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services of the Department of Public Welfare was awarded the grant in part based upon the results of a pilot program that occurred in Montgomery County. The grant is being utilized to expand the CPS Project. The grant runs through September 2007.

In July 2004, the Mental Health Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania in partnership with the Montgomery County Office of Mental Health/Mental Retardation/Drug and Alcohol Services, local providers, consumers, family members, and other stakeholders implemented a Certified Peer Specialist Program similar to those developed in other states. Through this program, current or former consumers of mental health services are being trained and certified to function as Peer Specialists. These training programs assist consumer trainees to better understand peer support, communication skills, cultural competency, outreach, engagement, conflict management, crisis intervention, setting up and sustaining mutual self-help groups, helping clients build their own self-directed recovery tools, and navigating the work place.

In Pennsylvania, Peer Specialist certification consists of an intensive 10 full day training program, covering topics such as recovery principles, communication skills and cultural diversity. As a result, 18 consumers are now certified and functioning as the State's first Certified Peer Specialists through the Montgomery pilot program. These Certified Peer Specialists are employed in various service settings, including Targeted Case Management, Community Treatment Teams, and Mobile Psychiatric Rehabilitation programs. Montgomery County celebrated their one-year anniversary in July 2005 and has since reported their Year One findings.

As of this date, Pennsylvania has three regional Certified Peer Specialist projects underway encompassing 13 counties through the CMS Grant. Additionally a Certified Peer Specialist project exists in four counties through the closing of Harrisburg State Hospital, while the original pilot in Montgomery County continues.

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According to OMHSAS reporting, all projects are on schedule and the Certified Peer Specialist Trainings will occur between March and July 2006. Technical assistance and peer support groups will be established for the projects once the training is completed. The technical assistance and support groups will be created for both providers and peer specialists. Established peer specialist programs throughout the country, most notably the Georgia project, indicates that providing ongoing education, networking opportunities and support for all involved with the project is critical to meeting outcomes and realizing success.

OMHSAS has submitted a State Plan Amendment to win CMS approval to support a continued and expanded program by seeking Medicaid reimbursement of peer specialist services through the Mental Health Rehabilitation Option. According to consistent OMHSAS reporting at stakeholder convenings, we may know as early as June 2006 if this proposed Medicaid plan amendment is approved.

NAMI members can support this proven vehicle for enhancing recovery by advocating for the ongoing provision of training and support to peer specialists, while urging for the expansion of peer specialist programs throughout the state. The Peer Specialist Program not only establishes competitive professional employment opportunities for

individuals in recovery from mental illness, but also addresses the attitudes and environments within the system; therefore, creating a systems change and new opportunity for a true recovery oriented Mental Health Service System.

Where to Turn for Further Information

For detailed information on the Georgia Certified Peer Specialist Program access: www.gacps.org/Home.html.

To stay current on the Pennsylvania CPS Program access: www.mhrecovery.com. This site also provides opportunities to participate in the forums for the project.

PA Department of Public Welfare, Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services: Carol J. Ward-Colasante, CPS Project Director, email, ccolasante@state.pa.us or phone, 717-772-7913.

To access the 1 Year Outcomes Report of the Montgomery County CPS pilot contact: Pam Howard, Adult MH Services, Montgomery County MH/MR Program, (610) 278-3642.

1. Definition of recovery generated by the Pennsylvania Recovery Workgroup 2004, endorsed by PA Department of Public Welfare Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

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My own family story illustrates how the barrier of stigma kept members of our family silent for too long. I had been employed at the state hospital for over 5 years when I was informed that an elderly family member of my husband's had died. My family, as well as the family of my husband are very close, therefore, I was surprised that I had never met this gentleman. It was after the funeral visitation that I learned that this great-uncle had spent his entire adult life at Torrance State Hospital due to a serious episode of depression. Following a stroke as an older adult, he became a resident of the Nursing Facility at Torrance and finally, at South Mountain, a state owned and operated nursing facility. I later learned of his sister, another relative I never had the pleasure of knowing, who also had received treatment at the state hospital as a young adult. I discovered that their siblings had faithfully visited them at the hospital but they never spoke of them nor discussed their illnesses.

I often think now of the positive impact NAMI Southwestern Pennsylvania could have had on my family members, if only they had availed themselves of NAMI support. I have come to know how the ability to share similar experiences with other NAMI families would have helped them give voice to counter the stigma. Their fear of stigma and the misconception that they were alone, kept them silent regarding their experiences as loving family members of two individuals diagnosed with mental illness.

There is a power in belonging. NAMI Southwestern PA enables us all to know that we are not alone. Through NAMI there are resources available to educate us; there are advocates to give voice to our collective concerns; and there is support for us as we face the challenges that await us. Please share with others the vision that no one should feel alone and encourage them to become members of NAMI Southwestern PA today. ☺