



MENTAL HEALTH BULLETIN

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DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WELFARE

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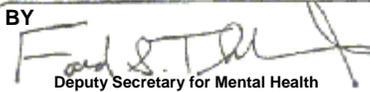
NUMBER

OMH-95-03

SUBJECT

**Guidelines for Supporting the Development of
Consumer Self-Help Groups**

BY


Deputy Secretary for Mental Health

SCOPE:

Alliance for the Mentally Ill in Pennsylvania
County MH/MR Administrators
Pennsylvania Association of Community Providers
Psychiatric Physicians of Pennsylvania
Pennsylvania Association of Rehabilitation Facilities
Pennsylvania Mental Health Consumers Association
Base Service Unit Directors
Community Residential Rehabilitation Providers
Mental Health Partial Hospitalization Programs
Mental Health Social Rehabilitation Programs
Outpatient Psychiatric Clinics
Vocational Rehabilitation Facility Directors
Private Psychiatric Inpatient Units
Private Psychiatric Hospitals
Superintendents, State Mental Hospitals
Administrator, South Mountain Restoration Center
State and Area CSP Committees

PURPOSE:

This bulletin, developed in conjunction with the State Community Support Program Advisory Committee, provides specific guidelines for supporting the development of consumer self-help groups within the mental health system. The recommendations are low cost, but have the potential to aid the empowerment of consumers throughout the state. The Office of Mental Health supports the development of consumer self-help groups throughout the state and encourages state hospitals, county mental health administrators and provider agencies to provide funding and other assistance as specified in these guidelines to promote the development of self-help groups by consumers.

BACKGROUND:

Consumer self-help groups have developed rapidly across the state over the past several years. Consumer self-help groups are groups of consumers run by and for consumers to provide mutual support, peer and

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Your Area Office of Mental Health

systems advocacy, education and other purposes as defined by the group. Peer self-help can be extremely beneficial in providing informal supports to consumers. In addition, self-help can build consumer independence through increasing self-esteem and reducing dependence upon more traditional services. Consumers themselves are responsible for operating self-help groups, but other individuals are welcome to assist in getting a group started.

For the purposes of this bulletin, empowerment is defined as follows: Empowerment means an individual, through a continual process of development, is taking charge of his/her life situation and making choices and decisions about his/her life. Empowerment is self-developed by the individual concerned; others can assist but cannot create empowerment.

GUIDELINES:

Staff of county mental health programs and state hospitals, provider agencies, family groups and consumers can play an important role in encouraging the development of consumer self-help groups. Listed below are some guidelines that can be useful in helping a group to get started and to work through on-going challenges.

- I. Helping a Consumer Self-Help Group Get Started
 - 1) Provide education to mental health staff about the benefits of consumer self-help, e.g., in-service trainings.
 - a) Bring in consumer educators to give presentations about the benefits of self-help within the mental health system.
 - b) Address any misunderstandings mental health staff may have, including fears that jobs will be in jeopardy, in the implementation of self-help within the system,
 - c) Provide training to staff on their role in facilitating self- help groups including helping groups through "leaderless" times, as well as knowing when to back-off and listen.
 - 2) Encourage interested staff, consumers, and family members to recruit additional consumers to form a self-help group. To help in recruiting, give information about other consumer groups through samples of their newsletters and conference brochures, visit other self-help groups to gain first-hand experience, etc.
 - 3) Contact national technical assistance centers or I CAN in Pennsylvania (see below list), and/or local consumer groups to ask for assistance,
 - 4) Arrange for a consumer speaker to address an initial meeting of interested consumers on "How to Start a Self-Help Group." Provide a list of consumer leaders that the group can call on to get started if it needs assistance,

- 5) Assist in arranging publicity, transportation and a meeting space for regular self-help group meetings.
- 6) Inform all consumers about the self-help meetings but avoid pressuring consumers to go to the meetings or making these meetings required therapy, as this would hamper consumer empowerment

II. Facilitating Development of the Group

- 1) Encourage group members to designate their own leaders, and to set their own priorities and goals.
- 2) Support emerging consumer leaders.
- 3) Encourage problem solving by group membership and avoid solving problems "for them."
- 4) If the group desires, assist them with learning to use meeting procedures and group structure.
- 5) Assist consumers to get a representative from their group on the county MH/MR board and local MH program board and receive appropriate training on the role of board members. Consumer groups may also assist in developing community support programs.
- 6) Offer technical assistance in writing grant proposals.
- 7) Assist consumers in understanding various funding sources and applying for appropriate state, county and private funding as well as how to do their own fund-raising.
- 8) Assist the group in finding out about and getting scholarships to national and statewide mental health conferences.
- 9) Gradually phase out provider participation in group meetings and assist the group in identifying any provider liaison relationship desired on an on-going basis.

III. Meeting the Challenges

Sometimes conflicts arise between consumer groups and their sponsor or funding agency. The following are guidelines for resolving conflicts between an increasingly independent self-help group and staff authority:

- 1) Staff can help mediate conflicts by clarifying issues, keeping lines of communication open, listening to and respecting each other's point of view.
- 2) It is important for staff to learn how to allow a group to solve its own problems. Staff can assist a group in researching a situation but the group should be encouraged to make its own decisions. The group should be assisted in developing a conflict

and grievance resolution process, which may include resources outside of the group and/or the sponsoring organization. Staff should assist with group empowerment, but should not be a supervisor or decision-maker. Fiduciary agencies should advise and provide technical assistance to consumer groups regarding their fiscal responsibility, including state/county fiscal requirements, but should allow the group to make decisions regarding the expenditure of funds.

Sometimes conflicts occur among members of the group. The following guidelines may be useful when conflicts occur within a group:

- 1) Staff should recognize that conflicts are a natural part of the process of self-empowerment. Staff should not take sides, should stay out of the conflict and allow consumers to mediate among themselves. Staff can also provide a listening ear for both sides.
- 2) Consumers should be encouraged to set up a democratic process which allows for input and voting from all participants.
- 3) Staff can encourage the group to seek outside assistance in conflict resolution.
- 4) Remember that conflicts may be part of the developmental process and may lead to long-term improvements.

IV. Meeting the Challenges

In Pennsylvania, the following consumer-run organization has been funded through a contract with the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, Office of Mental Health, to provide technical assistance to consumer groups throughout the state:

Involved Consumer Action Network (I CAN) in Pennsylvania
311 S. Juniper Street, Room 902
Philadelphia, PA 19107
215-735-2465, Ext. 258 (John Farmer)

I CAN will provide assistance to counties, state hospitals, providers, families, consumers and others who are interested in receiving assistance in starting or maintaining a self-help group. I CAN will also provide information on national technical assistance resources and local resources, as needed.