



# Letting recovery take root

**Homeless consumers  
are empowered to make decisions that fundamentally  
change their lives** BY CARL CLARK, MD

**Meet Marika.** She was consistently homeless for 12 years, and on and off the streets before that. Suffering from bipolar disorder, she had been addicted to alcohol and drugs since her teens, self-medicating her long-undiagnosed mental illness. She bounced in and out of mental health counseling, mostly at financially strapped agencies with few resources beyond medication—at one point, she took 20 prescription pills a day.

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In 2003, she wound up on the streets of Denver. Through a partnership between the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) and the Mental Health Center of Denver (MHCD), she found housing and mental healthcare. MHCD began by asking her to make choices about her life and her care. This was a radical concept for Marika—no one had ever asked her what goals she wanted to accomplish.

Recovery was not a straight path for Marika. At one point, she stopped taking all her medications, had a psychotic episode, and landed in the hospital for 21 days. Upon her discharge, CCH took her back into its transitional housing and MHCD continued working with her.

In the ensuing months, Marika turned her life around. Through MHCD's "2Succeed in Education and Employment" program, she obtained a competitive job at Denny's, working 40 hours per week. She also worked on her GED and took a computer course through 2Succeed. After completing these educational programs, she found an administrative job at a Fortune 100 company in early 2005, where she works today.

Marika has her own apartment—not government-subsidized housing—and is engaged. She has rebuilt relationships with her family, and rejoiced in getting paid time off from work when her granddaughter was born. She still sees a counselor and takes medications (down to a much more manageable three pills a day). She understands her disease, knows better how to manage it and the warning signs to look for, and is self-sufficient.

All of us in the mental health field have stories like Marika's that we recall with a great sense of accomplishment, stories we turn to for hope and inspiration and evidence that we can make a difference. Marika's story illustrates how MHCD helps homeless consumers—one of the most difficult populations for any provider—to recover. MHCD's system

of care emphasizes and facilitates consumer strengths and recovery by providing wide-ranging, yet thoroughly integrated, services in an atmosphere of consumer choice. Perhaps MHCD's most important innovation is a "360-degree" approach to measuring recovery, using environmental, clinical, and client-specified subjective indicators. Our signature approach was awarded the 2005 Community Provider of Excellence Award by the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare.

MHCD brings one homeless person off the street every day—into housing and into treatment. While a tiny drop in the bucket of Denver's homeless population, these individuals account for approximately 70% of our consumers. It seems fitting, then, to



explain MHCD's approach through the lens of serving the homeless mentally ill.

### A Foundation of Funding

MHCD is fortunate to have access to unique funding created by the so-called "Goebel settlement," a landmark resolution to a long-running class-action lawsuit. The Goebel lawsuit is named after Ruth Goebel, a homeless woman with mental illness who died on the streets of Denver because of a lack of housing and access to mental health care. The class-action suit was brought forth on behalf of homeless people with mental illness and provides services/funding for 1,600 people at any given time to receive the evidence-based treatment services that make a difference in people's lives. The settlement created a pool of funds for treating Denver's homeless mentally ill and fostered an impressive (and unfortunately all too rare) basis for collaboration between MHCD and local shelters.

TABLE 1. Consumers' housing status at admission and discharge

Selected housing status	Admission (n = 92) %	Discharge (n = 92) %
Shelter	50.0	26.1
Street	34.8	13.0
Supported housing	3.3	16.3
Other independent housing*	7.6	38.0

\*Independent housing includes consumer-owned or -rented units and living with family or friends.

Even with the Goebel settlement, MHCD struggles with fragmented funding sources just as every provider does. As our colleagues who employ a recovery-based approach know, many funding and reimbursement rules are not recovery-oriented. It is a constant challenge to determine how to make available funding fit our model and receive sufficient support to continue our work.

### A Network of Partnerships

MHCD works closely with CCH, shelters, and other providers to identify needs and develop services, and we support each other in seeking funding. Such close coordination enhances each organization's ability to meet homeless consumers' needs. Two cornerstones of this collaboration are:

**Shelter outreach.** MHCD case managers are housed full time at three local homeless shelters. Being on-site enables them to identify individuals in need of services and bring them into MHCD's program. In 2003-2004, one shelter case manager identified 63 people who became MHCD consumers.

**Housing first.** Because the lack of stable housing magnifies every other problem, MHCD's shelter case managers focus first on finding housing for the potential consumers they identify—whether or not those consumers ultimately choose to participate in treatment. The hope is to eventually engage them in needed care by first addressing this most pressing need. We can prioritize MHCD housing resources for homeless consumers who meet Goebel need requirements.

From 2003 to 2005, MHCD provided intensive case management and vocational

rehabilitation services for a subpopulation of homeless people with severe mental illness through a collaborative program with CCH called Recovery Connection. This program was funded by a federal grant and incorporated the service elements described elsewhere in this article. Table 1 shows housing status for Recovery Connection consumers at admission and discharge. Note that five times more consumers were in supported housing at discharge than at admission. The data for this table come from the Colorado Client Assessment Record (CCAR), which is used by the state of Colorado to track outcomes in consumers of mental health services. The CCAR does not differentiate between individuals housed in stable housing and those housed more precariously, for example, staying with friends or relatives (doubled up). We know that a good portion of those listed as living independently in fact do fall into the latter category, but we have no way to identify these individuals. The important point, however, is that these individuals are off the streets.

### Guidance Toward Recovery

While we provide a wide array of services to the homeless mentally ill, certain hallmarks distinguish MHCD's approach.

**Multiple assessment tools to gauge consumer recovery and provider effectiveness.** We start by administering a "Recovery Needs Level Assessment" to new consumers, to help them define "recovery" and help us provide the services they need (see sidebar). Homeless consumers may start by noting basic needs—food, housing, etc. We also ask them to identify their hopes, dreams, and aspirations (e.g., re-creating a relation-

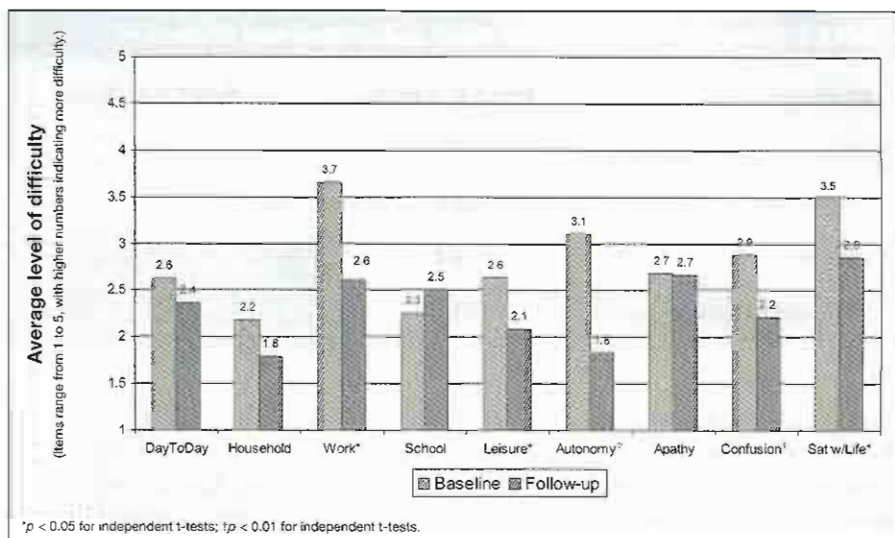
ship with family or not being dependent on others for support).

We administer the assessment at intake, three and six months after admission, and every six months thereafter to gauge progress and match our level of service intensity to each consumer's needs. Every two months, case managers complete a "Recovery Markers Report," rating each consumer's progress in areas such as housing, employment, substance abuse, etc. Again, consumers set their own goals, and the report helps to assess their progress toward these goals. This tool enables us to identify consumers who are having more difficulty than others, allowing us to adapt our methods of engaging them. Not surprisingly, the most dramatic change tends to occur in the first six months of treatment.

Consumers rate their own recovery using our "Consumer Recovery Measure." Administered every six months, this powerful tool enables consumers to explain the extent to which, for example, they feel more hopeful and more in charge of their own lives.

Finally, every year a team of consumers interviews their peers using the "Recovery Enhancing Environment Survey." Consumers rate us, telling us the extent to which the overall MHCD environment supports their recovery.

The figure displays consumer responses from Recovery Connection for 45 consumers for whom initial and follow-up data were available and illustrates the level of difficulty they experienced in nine areas of their lives at each time period (the time frame was from admission to discharge in Recovery Connection, and as a result was variable dependent on how long the individual was in the project). Data were measured with the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) tool. At baseline, consumers reported having the most difficulty with work, followed by satisfaction with life, and autonomy. Consumers reported significant improvement in five areas: work, leisure, autonomy, confusion, and satisfaction with life. Of the remaining four areas, two—managing day-to-day life and managing household responsibilities—shifted in the desired direction, apathy appeared to be unchanged, and difficulty with school showed an



**Figure.** Recovery Connection consumer-reported level of difficulty in nine domains at baseline and follow-up (n = 45).

upward trend. The school area, however, had a substantial number of missing data, and analyses were not performed.

**Intensive Case Management Services (ICM) based on the Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) model.** Just one of



**TABLE 2. Consumer-reported educational and employment attainment**

Attainment	Time 1 (n = 45) %	Time 2 (n = 45) %
Enrolled in school/job training	4.4	22.7
Have a GED	24.4	37.8
Employed	4.4	15.5
Unemployed—looking	24.2	24.4

the evidence-based approaches we employ, this graduated system of case management supports the recovery-oriented model. It is based on the expectation that people with serious mental illness who receive the right level of services can, and do, get better.

The Recovery Needs Level Assessment helps us determine the type of case management team to assign the consumer. For example, a homeless, dually diagnosed person with no acknowledgment of his/her mental health needs requires a very different level of care than a similar person who understands he/she has a problem. We would assign the former consumer to a caseworker with a relatively low caseload. Then, as that consumer gets better and needs less frequent intensive treatment, he would “graduate” to a caseworker with a bigger caseload. The lowest intensity of case management services at MHCD is a 40:1 client/staff ratio.

**The “Denver Approach” to psychosocial rehabilitation.** As consumers progress through our case management system, they may be offered the opportunity to participate in our signature program, 2Succeed. We provide:

- Vocational counseling
- Educational support
- Transitional employment experiences
- Job skills development
- Job placement services
- Ongoing support to help consumers find and keep jobs
- Social and recreational opportunities

2Succeed provides courses designed to prepare consumers to apply for jobs or simply to function better in society. Offerings

include basic literacy, GED preparation, training for working in food service, and computer training. Approximately 1,000 people enroll in our education courses each year.

2Succeed represents a move away from the traditional, sheltered clubhouse model to full community integration. Indeed, MHCD’s very definition of “supported” employment differs from that of many providers. Rather than “sheltered” employment at an MHCD-managed enterprise, our supported employment is actually a competitive job with ongoing programmatic support from MHCD staff. In 2003, we placed 375 of 550 consumers who entered the program in outside jobs; 47% of consumers in 2Succeed competitive employment continue to receive MHCD services.

Table 2 shows changes in education participation and employment status in Recovery Connection consumers. Education and employment status were measured for a subpopulation of 45 consumers for whom we collected initial and follow-up data using the GPRA tool. The data show a substantial increase in school enrollment/job training and receipt of a GED. We also documented an increase in employment (either full or part time).

Of course, we face challenges with “mental health illiteracy” among prospective employers and their workers. Our Business Advisory Board, composed of businesses that have employed MHCD consumers, gives us a window into the business community’s concerns, and its members act as our ambassadors to their peers. Sometimes we’ll help a prospective employer test the waters with a consumer by covering that consumer’s pay for a couple of months. If things work out,

the employer then assumes responsibility for pay and benefits.

**Authentic consumer engagement.** As noted throughout this article, we require consumers to take responsibility for their own care by setting their own goals. We broaden this concept by involving consumers in service delivery and governance. For example, consumers helped to develop our Recovery Needs Level Assessment, the Recovery Markers, and the Consumer Recovery Measure, and conduct our annual survey.

In fact, a homeless consumer shaped many of our current mechanisms for consumer involvement. Mike came to us with severe depression and difficulty interacting with others. Through 2Succeed, he completed a community college degree. Soon thereafter, while he continued to receive services through MHCD, we asked Mike to participate on our consumer survey team. He became team leader, and we later hired him full time to run our Office of Consumer and Family Affairs. Mike also oversaw our Consumer/Staff Partnership Council and served as our Consumer & Family Advocate. Mike was able to go off disability benefits entirely and purchase his own home.

The challenge to this level of engagement is finding the right consumers to participate and lead. Mike was, quite simply, a star. Unfortunately, he recently passed away, and we are assessing how to structure the Office of Consumer and Family Affairs for the future.

## Conclusion

Applying a recovery model to homeless consumers can seem challenging. Yet this treatment mind-set is perhaps most crucial for the homeless population. Almost more than any other group, the homeless mentally ill population is in a position to truly change their lives if given an opportunity to access more than simply short-term stabilization. ■

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## The Recovery Needs Level Assessment

The Recovery Needs Level Assessment is an instrument developed jointly by clinical staff, management, and consumers of MHCD that evaluates a variety of areas in the consumer's recovery path. These domains include:

- clinical (e.g., Global Assessment of Functioning scores and visits to the hospital or ER for psychiatric reasons)
- engagement (e.g., level of engagement in services and level of case management needed)
- symptoms (e.g., level of symptom interference and harmful behavior toward self or others)
- environment (e.g., community support around the consumer and level of stress in the environment where the consumer currently lives)

The Recovery Needs Level Assessment is scored automatically according to an algorithm based on MHCD's experience of how these areas may affect recovery. The results correspond to proposed levels of treatment that can be accepted or overridden by MHCD's clinical staff, based on further assessment or analysis of other events not necessarily captured by the instrument. MHCD's Recovery Needs Level Assessment and the associated algorithm are available upon request from MHCD. Contact CEO Carl Clark, MD, at (303)