The Mental Health Center of Denver has worked for many years to create a Recovery Culture which supports the people we serve to live a full life in spite of a mental illness. (Seven Key Strategies that Work Together to Create Recovery Based Transformation, Community Mental Health Journal, Volume 48, Number 3) We also have developed a systematic method for measuring the success of this recovery system. As with many community mental health providers, our initial focus was on the people we serve and how to help them achieve their life goals. Subsequently we began to more fully understand that our measures of recovery are really measures of human happiness and that, in short, consumer recovery is aligned with staff goals for happiness. This led to the understanding that the promotion of a wellness culture for staff is critical to the successful development of a recovery culture for the people we serve.

In fostering a wellness culture for staff we strive to bring out the best in ourselves and others by 1) Seeing everyone’s strengths, 2) Supporting and encouraging one another, 3) Celebrating staff accomplishments, and diversity, 4) Respecting ourselves and others, 5) Listening to each other, 6) Creating an environment of healthy and positive relationships and community partnerships, 7) Believing everyone wants to be great, 8) Being passionate about our mission and having fun in the process, and 9) Believing anything is possible. Our entire staff collaborated to generate this nine-point Wellness Culture Statement at an all-staff meeting during which our staff members worked in groups to identify the key values of a wellness culture. As an aside, I find it interesting that these statements correlate well with the Core Principles and Values of the United States Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association.

There are five main pillars supporting our wellness culture: Pathways to Leadership training (Stomp the Elephant in the Office, by Steven Vannoy and Craig Ross); StrengthsFinder assessment (Strengths Finder 2.0 by Tom Rath; Catalytic Coaching (Catalytic Coaching: The End of the Performance Review by Gary Markle); employee recognition programs; and wellness promoting activities and trainings.

1. The Pathways to Leadership training, which is provided by the firm Verus Global, inculcates in our staff a set of communication and interpersonal skills and tools to promote positive, constructive and collaborative interactions that bring out the best in ourselves and our colleagues. Specifically, the training prepares our employees to: (A) Approach situations – even setbacks and disappointments – in positive, nonjudgmental ways; (B) Value collaboration to set and achieve common goals; (C) Communicate constructively; and (E) Repair relationships that have come under stress.

The training is conducted offsite in groups of 20 over a three-day period. Formed from staff members across the organization, these groups forge a unique identity, keep in contact after the training, and reconvene periodically for follow-on activities to reinforce and further embed the lessons and skills they have learned. Additionally, each training group subdivides into four POIS groups (it stands for Pathways Ongoing Integration and Sustainability) that likewise sustain the benefits of training through continued communication and activity.

2. Developed by the Gallup organization, StrengthsFinder is an assessment tool to identify an individual’s top strengths, whether they be social, intellectual, motivational or organizational. Within two months of hire, in addition to learning about the wellness culture during orientation, each new employee reads the book StrengthsFinder 2.0 and takes the accompanying online assessment. Managers incorporate these findings in the Catalytic Coaching process (described below) conducted individually with team members to create and implement individual staff development plans.

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3. Catalytic Coaching is a management technique by which, on an annual basis, managers engage their team members in an iterative three-step process of identifying achievements and setting goals for personal and professional development. Through this, team members and the supervisor bring their respective perspectives into the conversation and work together to assign roles and responsibilities that will be both engaging for the team and optimally beneficial to the organization. The Mental Health Center of Denver has pioneered the practice of using StrengthsFinder to inform and engage employees in catalytic coaching processes to develop plans that play to employees’ strengths.

4. Employee Recognition is an important means of facilitating staff members’ appreciation for each other’s extraordinary contributions. A “Way to go!” is a paper certificate that any employee can award to a colleague at any time. The RIWE Awards are bestowed quarterly and annually on the basis of nominations by staff members who wish to recognize innovation, inspiration [and] Service Excellence.

In addition to conducting the Pathways to Leadership training program with Vera Global, the Wellness Culture CREW organizes activities including an AIDS Walk, All Staff Picnic/Olympics, Dragon Boat races, and barfests, and on and on. The Mental Health Center of Denver’s employee assistance program and internal training department also provide extensive training in such areas as work-life management, time management, self-care, trauma recovery, compassion fatigue and smoking cessation.

The Mental Health Center of Denver promotes a smoke-free workplace, provides discounted off-site counseling for off-site organization-wide wide meetings, coordinates the annual Earth Day observance (with activities including a clothing exchange and recycled clothing fashion show) and Bike to Work Day. The Together Green Team continuously seeks to promote resource efficiency, informing the purchase of Energy Star-rated appliances, compact fluorescent bulbs, and water filters for faucets and fountains in place of bottled water or coolers. Our dedication to being green strongly influenced the choices made in stabilizing a 60-year-old building structure as the home of our new Recovery Center, a building that is on track to earn a LEED Platinum certification.

Just as we have developed measures of recovery for our consumer services, we are committed to measuring the engagement of our employees and the wellness culture. We have recently partnered with a company, New Measures, to assess our process for improving engagement. In addition to providing us with comparison data to other companies, they are working with us to identify the critical drivers of engagement specific to our organization. This enables each team to develop a plan for improving engagement scores in the same way our recovery measures enable them to develop plans to increase their success in managing recovery.

We strongly believe that wellness culture we have created and are sustaining for our staff improves recovery outcomes for our consumers. We are currently in the process of collecting data from our staff engagement measures and our consumer recovery measures to test this hypothesis.

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Peer counselors have a positive impact on consumers in various settings throughout the hospital, helping them recover by letting them know that they have been there. They are “ambassadors of empathy” and agents of change, by helping change the culture of the institution. They do this with creativity and their role in promoting recovery in attitude and practice. Peer counselors provide evidence that recovery is real, because they are the evidence. Most importantly, they maintain their own recovery by helping others.

We wish to acknowledge Joyce B. Wale, Sr. Assistant Vice-President, HHC Central Office of Behavioral Health for her vision and support of integrating peers in HHC’s Behavioral Health workforce; Dr. Joseph P. Merlino, Deputy Executive Director, Behavioral Health Services, KCHC; and Behavioral Health Services overall, with whom we collaboratively create a Wellness and Recovery model benefiting both consumers of care and staff.

Next Steps

As we continue to move forward we look for ways in which to expand, professionalize, and refine the role of the peer counselor at KCHC. The peer counselors on the KCHC inpatient units have recently begun documenting recovery in the electronic medical record, providing an opportunity to ensure that recovery is real. They help change organizational culture by promoting recovery in attitude and practice. Peer counselors support personal recovery by helping others. They provide evidence that recovery is real. They are the evidence.

Outcomes

In response to nine statements relating to the impact peer counselors made on consumers’ level of engagement, sense of empowerment, and presence of hope, consumers reported during a six-month period that peer counselors often made a positive impact on their hospital stay in numerous ways (N=290; 85-90%). The survey items focus on such topics as nutrition, meditation, inflammation, detoxification, credit score protection and spiritual wellness.

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work: Activity logs document service provision in four areas including individual and group engagement, treatment planning, and other activities that support consumer care; Weekly orientation tracking reports capture the detailed process conducted with newly admitted consumers consisting of eight domains ranging from understanding the milieu to learning about advance directives; Patient Assessment and Goals (PAG) forms foster empowerment by helping consumers identify goals and concerns prior to attending treatment team meetings; Peer-run groups address such topics as advocacy, goal setting, conflict resolution, and crisis and aftercare planning; Counseling and collaboration with other team members optimizes aftercare planning and identifies appropriate community resources, as well as exemplifies “out-of-the-box” thinking rather than pathologizing when it comes to addressing consumers’ concerns and discomforts.

Observations

Consistent with the literature on peer engagement, trends commonly identified are that peer counselors, in the role as a peer, grow both in the role as a peer (creating a “pull” for the other members of the treatment team; grow both in the role as a peer (creating a “pull” for the other members of the treatment team;