

Alameda County Consumer Opportunities and Programs

Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas

At our May 25 meeting we had a panel discussion with representatives from four main groups which represent and deal with issues related to consumers of services in Alameda County. Speakers included **Jay Mahler**, Consumer Relations Manager with the county's Behavioral Health Care Services (BHCS), **Jaleah Winn**, Wellness Educator at the BHCS Wellness Recovery Resiliency Hub, **Natalie Stone**, Outreach Coordinator at Peers Envisioning and Engaging in Recovery Services (PEERS), and **Katrina Killian**, Program Manager at the Alameda County Network of Mental Health Clients. Although the services of these groups sometimes overlap, each has specific goals and areas of focus.

All of the speakers related a lifetime of involvement with mental health issues, both as family members and as consumers themselves. Jaleah Winn recalled visiting a mentally ill relative as a child and, against the supervising attendant's orders, "crossing the black line" in the floor to hug him. She urged everyone to cross that line for their family member in an effort to wipe out the stigma and discrimination attached to mental illness.

In describing BHCS services, Jay Mahler noted that he and others had worked for the Mental Health Services Act¹ and then found it provided "not one penny" for consumer-run programs. In response, BHCS founded the Pool of Consumer Champions (POCC), which started with 425 people, in an effort to work for systemic change. They have raised \$967,000 in support of a campaign for social inclusion. The organization also works on hiring consumers to become mental health workers, similar to the use of alcohol and drug abuse clients in those programs, and has raised \$550,000 for education and training of Alameda County consumers.



JAY MAHLER

POCC currently maintains 12 committees and funds \$84,000 a year in stipends so that consumers can participate in them. The committees represent the diversity of the county, running programs for African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, and transition-age youth (TAY). They address issues important to consumers, such as the criminal justice system and preparing police officers for crisis intervention, and training professionals to help consumers deal with traumas such as losing a loved one or moving into a new place.

Issues in focus for 2012 include consumer longevity, the fact that people with mental illness on average die 25 years younger than the general population;

¹ California Proposition 63, passed in 2004, provided for additional services for mental health through a 1% tax surcharge on incomes over \$1 million.

involvement with older adults, which will complement the POCC's current focus on youth; and utilization by African-Americans, a community that has been inappropriately served, receiving misdiagnoses and often ending up in the criminal justice system rather than treatment. For more information on BHCS programs, contact Jay Mahler at jmahler@acbhcs.org.



JALEAH WINN

The BHCS Wellness Recovery Resiliency Hub has the mission of “seek[ing] to engage the strengths of consumers, family members, and providers so that people-in-recovery can live meaningful lives guided by their own choices in their communities. We do this by offering workshops, ongoing classes, and events that build wellness-oriented experience, knowledge, skills, and practice.” Jaleah Winn noted that the Hub does not offer direct, one-on-one services to individuals but instead provides training, technical services, and consultation to organizations and family groups.

The Hub's methods are to:

- Partner with programs to design a wellness education series tailored to the group's needs.
- Offer choices of wellness education modules such as dialogues, focus groups, consensus and action planning workshops, recovery event and education seminar planning, and leadership training.
- Promote learning that starts with what is already known and practiced.
- Offer learning experiences and curricula that are easily applied to daily work.
- Build the program's capacity to sustain and grow its own expertise.
- Include providers, consumers, and family members in workshops and consultations.

Winn defined wellness as “feeling and/or pursuing the highest good in all aspects of life.” Recovery is “regaining strength after dealing with extreme difficulties.” And resiliency is “making a comeback while encountering or living with challenges.”

“We try to build consumer participation by doing really good work with all of our clients,” Winn concluded. Contact her at jwinn@acbhcs.org.

PEERS is a consumer-run organization, Natalie Stone said. With the help of BHCS and Jay Mahler, the group was awarded a \$1 million grant to start a social inclusion campaign. Rather than using anti-discrimination language, she said, the goal is to touch both internalized and externalized stigma and shift the way people view those with mental health challenges and their family members. “We are out to eliminate stigma and discrimination, because that is one of the key pieces working against people's wellness and recovery.”



NATALIE STONE

The campaign, which has just completed its planning year, will take three approaches. The first is empowerment through training consumers to do wellness recovery action

planning (WRAP). This is a tool of self-discovery and a way for someone to make plans for the time when he or she may not be able to plan. WRAP lets a person go through stages, identify triggers, and make a plan for them. The second approach is “emotional CPR,” which shows people how to approach and engage with someone who is struggling, other than with fear, anger, and shame—how to connect heart-to-heart. And third is community outreach, which for next year will focus on the African-American community, where there is a lot of denial, stigma, and stereotypes about mental health, and with the housing power holders, because it’s hard to recover without a safe, secure situation.

“We are building a community,” Stone concluded, “that says no more stigma—those attitudes aren’t working; no more discrimination—those behaviors are not acceptable.” Contact her at nstone@peersnet.org.



KATRINA KILLIAN

The Alameda County Network of Mental Health Clients runs a number of programs for consumers. Katrina Killian discussed several but noted they will be changing in the next month or so because of requirements in the Mental Health Services Act. The network’s historic programs include:

- Berkeley Drop-In Center, an open-door environment where consumers can be understood and ask for what they need without stigma and judgment. The program now serves a large homeless population with support for housing, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and education so that they can flourish in their independence.
- Reach Out, a visitation program to hospitals, locked facilities, and board-and-cares for people who would not otherwise be getting visitors.
- Reach Across in Fremont, a community place for consumers to meet and share their experiences. It supports programs including a WRAP group, arts and crafts, music, and computers.
- Tenant Support in Oakland, serving people in single-room occupancy and board-and-cares who have their housing but discover other emerging needs like meeting with a case manager, finding out about food vouchers, obtaining a bus pass, or using a computer.
- Support for Home Ownership, helping people who are ready to move into their own place with education about housing rights and training in filling out home loan applications.
- Building Employment Strategies Through Networking on Wellness, which has graduated 300 people since its start in 1998, including two classes in Spanish. Killian worked for this program when she started with the organization. “In terms of critical mass, consumer employment is huge,” she said. “Modeling is the best mentoring. If you can see other people do it, you can do it.”
- Criminal Records Repair, a new program that addresses the huge barrier a criminal record presents to housing and employment. This program includes one-on-one work to help consumers work on the issue and presentations to the community to educate people about what may be blocking a consumer’s ability to move forward.

- Oakland Connect, a new contract with Bay Area Community Services (BACS), which recently regained this program, that focuses on the homeless population with extreme mental health disabilities. The goal is not only to provide housing but also introduce these consumers to the support they need in order to overcome challenges.

For information on the updated programs, contact Katrina Killian at alcountynet@aol.com.