



## Transformative Efforts Related to the Employment of Individuals with Mental Illness in Washington State

This paper describes transformative leadership, collaboration, and activity in the state of Washington regarding employment of people with mental health disabilities. Employment is one of the leading priorities voiced by mental health consumers when asked about their life goals and desires, with the vast majority stating they aspire to work and want services and supports that help them achieve this goal.<sup>1</sup> Yet, employment outcomes for consumers are poor when compared to their stated interests, running as low as 15 percent.<sup>2</sup> According to a landmark five-year multi-site study, the Employment Intervention Demonstration Program (EIDP) funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's) Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS), mental health consumers achieve superior vocational outcomes when they receive employment services that integrate mental health and vocational supports using multidisciplinary provider teams, focus on rapid placement into jobs of the participant's choice, and provide ongoing support.<sup>3</sup>

With facilitation through Washington's SAMHSA-funded Mental Health Transformation (MHT) State Incentive Grant (SIG), stakeholders around the state came together to identify priority areas and desired outcomes for achieving Washington's vision that "all people in the state of Washington who experience mental health challenges will lead productive and fulfilling lives, free of stigma, in a safe and least restrictive environment."<sup>4</sup> Employment was selected as one of the eight priority areas for transformation of mental

health. This paper highlights chronologically key activities demonstrating the transformative nature of visionary and operational leadership and collaboration across agencies and stakeholders, including consumer leadership, to promote innovative practices related to employment of persons with mental illness. These activities have culminated in a cutting edge pilot project led by Washington's Disability Navigator Program through partnership between the Washington Service Corps and the Governor's Committee on Disability Issues and Employment (GCDIE), and facilitated by the Washington's MHT SIG project.

### History

During the second meeting of Washington State's Transformation Work Group (TWG), (February 2006) several TWG members noted that employment outcomes were not included in the President's New Freedom Commission goals. In response to this omission, the Director of Washington State's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Lynnae Ruttledge agreed to draft language incorporating employment goals into the state's plan. In June 2006, the TWG voted to officially incorporate employment as a separate goal in the comprehensive mental health plan, in addition to the six NFC Goals. This set in motion a number of initiatives intended to improve employment outcomes for individuals with mental illness.

On October 13, 2006, the TWG held an intensive work session to develop "next steps" for year two of grant implementation. Governor Gregoire directed the TWG to

identify, prioritize, and implement strategies to achieve the desired outcomes identified by the project's subcommittees. Many of the strategies put forth were funded by Transformation, including several projects related to employment. One of the most successful efforts came from the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) who, in an attempt to increase system collaboration, was funded to provide cross-systems training to combined audiences of DVR and local mental health service providers. To date, over 180 staff members have attended this day-long training focused on improving working relationships, the referral process, resource utilization, exploration of evidence-based and promising practices, and the use of peer counselors as long term supports. In addition to these cross trainings, DVR has sponsored numerous 2-day trainings on Motivational Interviewing and the Stages of Change Model. Also funded during this period was a project with the Washington State Employment Security Department to train mental health consumers to become certified Work Incentive and Benefits Counselors. DVR has been one of our strongest transformation allies, active in virtually all aspects of our transformation efforts.

In late 2006, the Mental Health Division began implementing a number of budget and legislative initiatives, one of which was the preparation of a plan for expanding employment options for individuals with mental illness. Through a contract with the Washington Institute for Mental Health Research and Training (WIMHRT), a group of 50+ key stakeholders was identified to serve as the Strategic Planning Group (SPG), tasked with advising the Division. On July 16, 2007, a one-day educational forum entitled, *The Role of Employment in Recovery: Improving Supports and Outcomes for Consumers in Washington* brought together nearly 200 professionals, consumers, and community members. The forum featured presentations by several national speakers and consumers on topics that included successful employment programs, employment financing and structural policy. The following day, the SPG

met to begin the process of providing specific recommendations for improvements. As a result of this comprehensive work, several projects were initiated. These include the creation of state-level funding partnerships that have strengthened system collaboration, targeted technical assistance to provider partners to create and sustain employment success, multiple supported employment training courses, and increased capacity to provide long-term employment supports.

Another employment-related project bloomed during the SPG meetings further illustrating cross-systems partnerships. Working with Transformation Grant staff (Jill San Jule, the Consumer Liaison for our project), the Northwest Disability and Business Technical Assistance Center (DBTAC) developed a 5-part teleconference series on *Recovery from Mental Illness & Substance Abuse*. Over 300 vocational rehabilitation professionals were trained in the principles and practices of recovery as well as specific strategies to support vocational rehabilitation customers with mental health needs. Jill served as a primary partner in development and delivery of training.

The Mental Health Division next initiated a concerted effort to strengthen Washington's Clubhouse Coalition in order to increase the capacity of clubhouses to provide supported employment. The Division has provided training and technical assistance to clubhouses, resulting in an increased capacity to contract with DVR and provide long-term employment supports.

Illustrating the notion that it only takes a few champions to spark innovation, correspondence between DVR and Jill in late 2006, led to the development of a very successful employment pilot program. In response to a request to better support DVR customers with mental health issues, transformation staff worked with a local DVR office in crafting an innovative pilot program. This program incorporated wellness psychoeducation in the form of two half-day seminars and a 10-week Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) class tailored to employment, all of which were

led by certified peer counselors from local mental health agencies. We are currently working with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and other TWG partners to expand this program. Jill San Jule led this effort, again demonstrating the value of consumer leadership in transformation efforts.

More recently, in collaboration with the Transformation Grant, DVR and Washington's Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG) project, the Mental Health Division hosted a 2-day employment conference titled, Ticket-To-Ride that attracted nearly 200 attendees (summer, 2008). Workshop offerings covered everything from the Healthcare for Workers with Disabilities (HWD) program, which makes it possible for people with disabilities to join the workforce without fear of losing their Medicare and Medicaid coverage, to the nuts and bolts of building a successful Employment Network (EN).

In the Spring and Summer of 2008, we asked our Transformation Work Group to take pause at the half way point of this five year grant, and, considering the progress made to date, consider what they thought was left undone, needing attention, or not yet addressed. The TWG condensed an original list of twelve or so topics, into seven priority areas where they were willing to work together to move forward. Employment remained a priority area, and beginning in late summer the TWG Employment Work Group identified several strategies that will build on the work that had been done to date to improve employment outcomes for individuals with mental illness.

Primary among this group's activity, they designed a track for the Washington State Behavioral Healthcare Conference to address multiple topics, all related to the issue of consumers working while keeping their Medicaid benefits. The conference is an annual event that usually draws about 600 Washington providers, consumers and administrators. The Employment Work Group felt that of all the options available, better dissemination of information on benefits of employment, and the relationship between Medicaid benefits and

employment was the highest priority need for the State. The workshops in this track will include:

- ***Benefits Planning: How Consumers Can Work and Preserve the Benefits They Need.*** Steve Kozak, BA (Department of Social & Health Services, Health and Recovery Services Administration) and Toby Olson, MPA (Governor's Committee on Disability Issues and Employment)
- ***Leadership to Make Work a Priority in Mental Health.*** John Rio, MA, CRC (Advocates for Human Potential), Bill Wilson, MSW (King County RSN), Greg Long (North Sound Mental Health Administration)
- ***Making Work a Priority by Evolution or Revolution: Implementing and Operating a Supported Employment Service.*** John Rio, MA, CRC (Advocates for Human Potential), Mike Donegan, MSW (Downtown Emergency Service Center), Lisa Hanks, BS (Community Trades and Careers / Sunrise Services)
- ***If Everyone is Already Doing It, How Come It Never Gets Done.*** (This workshop will address how practitioners can contribute to consumer health by addressing unemployment and poverty.) Joe Marrone, M.Ed (Senior Program Manager for Public Policy at the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMASS Boston), Peggy Swarbrick, PhD, OTR, CPRP (Director of Wellness and Recovery, Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey)
- ***Workforce Inclusion: The Employer's Perspective.*** Don Kay, BA (DSHS Division of Vocational Rehabilitation), Melodie Pazolt (Clark County Department of Community Services)

Other interesting projects were discussed by the work group before focusing on the conference agenda, but these were put on a "back burner" as

efforts turned to the conference agenda. One of these was the Disability Navigator Project.

## Disability Navigator Project

The Disability Navigator project is a collaborative partnership between Washington Service Corps and the Governor's Committee on Disability Issues and Employment (GCDIE). The project aims to develop, sustain and improve access, services and outcomes for people with disabilities within Washington's WorkSource system. WorkSource is a network of organizations and "one-stop" Career Centers that offer a variety of services to businesses and job seekers.

Washington Service Corps (WSC) Disability Navigator Project will place AmeriCorps\*VISTA members to serve as resources assisting WorkSource staff and partners to improve the access, services and outcomes that WorkSource Centers and Affiliates provide for job seekers who have disabilities.

Toby Olson, the Director of GCDIE, sits on the Washington State Transformation Work Group (TWG). Toby and his staff envisioned the possibility that with a staff lead and three VISTA members, these offices could accomplish a great deal in facilitating employment opportunities for persons with disabilities in local communities through increasing capacity, systems change, and local outreach. One of the challenges in working with some work source centers has been that persons with mental illness are not always readily identified as a person with a disability. Some have called mental illness a "hidden" disability, unlike blindness, or mobility impairments. Another challenge has been that the symptoms of the disability of mental illness might present challenges to a Work Source Center's ability to provide employment services for this population. Taken together, our belief was that we have not done all that we could to provide employment of persons with mental health disabilities, and that building the capacity of the WorkSource Centers to be welcoming, confident and effective in serving this population would be transformational. The suggestion put forth was that

if one of the VISTA members were a mental health consumer and had training as a peer counselor, we could begin to change perceptions AND increase local employment options.

In early 2009, Toby and grant staff began exploring the idea of how this might work. What we learned, mainly through the efforts of the Governor's Committee, was that we could provide the local matching funds, and that there were many benefits for peer counselors through the volunteer service corps. In their year of service in the VISTA anti-poverty program, members could obtain considerable experience and training opportunities as a VISTA member, receive a monthly stipend, some health insurance coverage, child care assistance, ongoing VISTA training and support, and they qualify for a \$5000 educational grant following successful completion of their year of service.

Particularly important for many peer consumers, we have learned that the VISTA monthly stipend does not count against the individual in terms of eligibility for Medicaid benefits (monthly disability income and health insurance). For those not on Medicaid the other benefits make participation attractive.

GCDIE is currently finalizing selection of sites for the Disability Navigator Programs. Once identified, Transformation Grant staff and DVR will assist in advertising openings. The Transformation Grant will use our established consumer communication networks, including our website, listservs, the mechanisms of the Office of Consumer Partnerships within MHD, and Transformation Grant sponsored groups to assist recruitment. We will also assist GCDIE and the Washington Service Corp in selecting candidates from the available pool, relying on consumer advisors and interviewers in the selection process.

We believe another important component of this project will be to support the consumer peers who are selected for these VISTA memberships, and to support the lead Disability Navigator staff, which

will be overseeing and supervising the work of these consumer peers, as well as other WorkSource Staff who may be working with these peers. For some WorkSource staff, this may be their first experience in working with peer consumers, and we want to provide the support they might require in terms of training as well as consultation and problem-solving, should a VISTA peer develop some problems in their VISTA placement. We are currently discussing this need with consumer-run programs and consumer network organizations in the State, as well as community mental health providers with strong peer counselors and peer support programs in place.

We will use this same resource to support the VISTA members themselves. We have envisioned a modified Wellness Recovery Action Plan approach to support these five VISTA members, who will be working in different areas of the State. Each member will be assisted in developing their own individualized WRAP plan, built around their VISTA membership and work in a Disability Navigator Office, taking into account the work they will be doing and the settings where they will be working.

We believe these components will help ensure success for these initial pilot program participants, and do so at a relatively low cost. We would like to expand the program in a second year, and believe the investment will contribute to the pilot's success.

## Summary

Washington remains committed to the employment goals originally set in the early days of the Transformation Grant and will continue to promote independence and community integration by expanding employment options for people living with mental illness. The TWG Employment Work Group will continue as a key venue for these efforts. The Disability Navigator Project is the latest in a series of efforts that have built upon prior successes to promote employment as a means to economic stability, personal recovery, and community integration for persons with serious mental illness.

## Endnotes

1. See, for example, the following:
  - a) Rogers, E.S.; Walsh, D.; Massotta, L.; and Danley, K. "Massachusetts Survey of Client Preferences for Community Support Programs: Final Report." Unpublished manuscript, Center for Psychosocial Rehabilitation, Boston, MA, 1991.
  - b) Campbell, J. and R. Schraiber, R. In pursuit of wellness: The Well Being Project. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Mental Health, 1989.
  - c) National Health Interview Survey-Disability Supplement (NHIS-D), 1994-1995.
2. See for example:
  - a) National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (1992). Strategies to Secure and Maintain
  - b) National Health Interview Survey-Disability Supplement (NHIS-D), 1994-1995.
3. See for example:

Cook, JA; Blyler, C; Leff, H.S.; MacFarlane, W.R.; Goldberg, R; Gold, P.B, Muesser, K; et. al. The Employment Intervention Demonstration Program: Major Findings and Policy Implications. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*: 2008, Volume 31, No. 4, 291–295
4. "2006 Washington Mental Health Transformation Plan: Phase " for Washington State's Mental Health Transformation Project Funded SAMHSA/CMHS' Mental Health Transformation State Incentive Grant Program under Grant # 6 U79 SM57468-01-2. Available at: <http://www.mhtransformation.wa.gov/MHTG/priorityreport.shtml#cmhp>.

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