Creating organizational commitment to change: Key to consumer employment success in a supportive housing agency

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Abstract. Supportive housing programs are highly effective in reducing recidivism and preventing homelessness among individuals with serious mental illness. However, supportive housing programs have not focused on increasing employment outcomes among consumers residing in their programs. In addition, creating organizational commitment among supportive housing providers towards improving consumer employment outcomes remains a major challenge. This article describes how an agency made an organizational transformation from providing traditional housing services to developing an in-house supported employment service, and successfully increased consumer competitive employment rates from 13% to 54% within two years. The organizational change strategies and interventions that can be generalized to other housing providers are discussed.

Keywords: Organizational change, disabilities, supportive housing and employment

1. Background

Housing with supports has been acknowledged as a critically important service for individuals with serious mental illness (SMI) [9]. Supportive housing is often referred to as the linear residential treatment model. It consists of housing as varied as group homes with live-in support staff, supervised apartment settings, and finally independent housing with minimal support [9,10].

Critics contend that the linear residential continuum contains elements that are “outdated” and “custodial” in their approach [10,11]. Nevertheless, it is clear that supportive housing in its various forms is an effective intervention for maintaining housing stability for a population that is especially vulnerable to experiencing homelessness in our society [9,11]. For many, supportive housing is the only option for decent and affordable residence.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge how critical the resource of housing is to the recovery process for persons with SMI. Borg and colleagues [2] conducted a qualitative study examining narratives of consumers discussing the importance of material resources in their recovery process. The primary resource cited was having a home. The findings indicated that material resources had significant non-material meaning for the recovery process of the participants in the study. Although it appears obvious, having a home provides the most basic material foundation for the recovery process. Without the stability afforded by a decent housing
environment, life is relegated to a constant struggle for mere survival.

For many consumers receiving supportive housing services, SSI or SSDI are the primary sources of income. However, relying on these benefits as the primary source of income ensures a lifetime of poverty. Consequently, encouraging employment is the most likely means to increase income, and improve economic standing. Additionally, many consumers consider returning to work an important recovery goal [3]. Therefore, the goal of helping consumers become employed in their communities seems to be the logical next step for housing providers. However, our literature review found no study that directly address employment outcomes among supportive housing providers, suggesting that supportive housing providers do not typically provide employment related rehabilitative services or measure consumer progress in the vocational domain. Instead, supportive housing programs usually measure their success by reducing re-hospitalization rates and preventing homelessness.

In order to transform from providing traditional mental health services to recovery oriented services, supportive housing programs will need to shift towards improving employment outcomes as a salient component of their services.

This paper will discuss a case example of a supportive housing agency that made an organizational transformation from providing residential services to providing recovery-oriented psychiatric rehabilitation services with a focus on developing in-house supported employment (SE) services.

2. Transformation process

2.1. Organizational change theory

Kotter and Schlesinger [5] contend that organizations considering implementing a significant change can expect to run into a certain amount of resistance. Further, managers must be aware that individuals are often invested in the status quo, are emotionally attached to how they do things, or are generally uncomfortable with change. Consequently, choosing an appropriate strategy for organizational change is critical, as even in situations where change may appear innocuous to managers, others in the organization may have a different perception.

Kotter and Schlesinger [5] suggest three methods for dealing with resistance to organizational change that are congruent with organizational culture of human service providers: (1) education and communication, (2) participation and involvement, and (3) facilitation and support. Educating staff about the rationale for the change, and consistently communicating about the process can enhance buy-in for the organizational change. Moreover, involving the participation of staff in the design of the change process can help empower individuals to embrace change. In addition, facilitating and providing technical support such as trainings in new skills can support a change process. Furthermore, listening and providing emotional support can be an effective method for addressing staff anxiety about an organizational change.

Marrone, Hoff and Gold [7] suggested organizational change strategies for human service programs considering embracing community employment as a core component of their services. They argue that a commitment to change must be driven by the agencies values and mission. Revamping the way a program does business is often an acknowledgement by managers or other stakeholders that the program could be doing a better job at meeting the needs of the individuals they serve. Additionally, they contend that in the process of producing the necessary change, an organization must have a sense of urgency and inevitability that the change will occur.

Marrone, Hoff and Gold [7] also pointed out that organizational commitment to community employment is a key to succeeding in assisting consumers with obtaining and maintaining employment. They further articulated critical factors for success including establishing clear quantifiable goals, empowering and supporting staff, and encouraging extensive consumer and family involvement. Finally, they believed that all stakeholders must incorporate the value that employment is a fundamental right for persons with disabilities.

In addition to the challenges described above, housing agencies considering an organizational change towards embracing employment services would confront a number of other challenges and barriers such as training staff to provide employment services, and developing a culture that values and promotes employment success among consumers as a core service. Agency management would need to execute a well thought out strategy to successfully implement an organizational change from that of a housing provider to a psychiatric rehabilitation organization with a significant emphasis on community employment.
2.2. Agency description

Triple C Housing, Inc. (Triple C) is a supportive housing agency that provides residential services in a continuum model, including 24-hour supervised group homes, semi-supervised apartments, and independent living with support. It provides services to approximately 60 consumers with SMI residing in the central region of New Jersey. The services are primarily community based case management activities focusing on assisting the residents with activities of daily living such as cooking, shopping, transportation, referral and linkage to other needed services including medication monitoring, counseling, and recreational activities. Triple C has about 30 full-time and 20 part-time employees.

2.3. Culture building

In 2005, responding to an increasing consumer desire for employment and long waiting lists for the SE services in the county, the board of directors and management team of Triple C saw an opportunity to develop an in-house SE program to meet the needs of its consumers. Furthermore, the management team considered the SE project as a springboard to transform the agency from a traditional residential service provider to a recovery-oriented psychiatric rehabilitation provider. They recognized that such a paradigm shift demanded a new organizational culture that values employment and promotes recovery.

The executive director of the agency sent a letter attached to the pay check of all employees announcing the beginning of the agency transformation, urging staff to get involved by volunteering to serve on committees, contributing ideas and suggestions, sharing the news with consumers and co-workers, and participating in the upcoming trainings.

An Employment Steering Committee (ESC) was formed to spearhead the SE initiative. The committee consisted of consumers, staff members, management staff and an outside employment consultant (first author) from the Integrated Employment Institute (IEI). IEI provides training and technical assistance to community mental health agencies and other community based service providers to improve employment outcomes for individuals with psychiatric illness. IEI is located within the Department of Psychiatric Rehabilitation and Counseling Professions at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. The committee worked on setting measurable goals and the time frame for achieving them, developing a tracking and reporting system for employment outcomes and planning training schedules.

Consumer members of the ESC hosted multiple consumer gatherings to introduce the employment initiative, encourage consumer involvement in the initiative, and provide information and support. They shared personal stories of pursuing employment and developing supports, invited guest speakers to address issues including benefits planning, disclosure issues, and provided information on available resources. Thus, consumers were informed of the employment initiative and available opportunities for participation. More importantly, these gatherings conveyed the message that work is valued and encouraged.

All full-time staff participated in an all-day training on employment and recovery at the start of the initiative. This training provided an opportunity to educate and communicate with staff members the vision of the upcoming organizational change, as well as encourage their participation and support. This was also the entering point of aligning staff members to the philosophical perspective that employment is an integral part in consumer recovery, and each staff member has a role in providing support to consumers in pursuit of employment success. The training covered many related areas including the role of employment in recovery, vocational and non-vocational benefits of employment, barriers to employment, principles of supported employment, basic knowledge of SSI/SSDI benefits planning, and strategies that staff can use to encourage and promote employment among consumers. The training used video tape of consumer testimonies, group exercises and role plays to help staff members understand consumer desire and interest in work as well as the need for support to overcome barriers. The training was video taped for part-time employees to view at a later time. The training process began to build a culture that embraced employment services as a critical component of the agency transformation.

Triple C also used many other strategies and tactics to embrace employment. At the annual holiday celebration dinner where all members of the board of directors, all staff, all consumers, and many family members attended, consumers are honored and awarded for maintaining job tenure, getting promotions and other employment related achievements. Job openings, posters of government work incentives and flyers of service resources, including the in-house SE services were posted at all program sites and consumer residences. In
addition, the first two staff members who volunteered to be trained as employment specialists (ES) received a one-time financial incentive.

2.4. In-house SE development

Triple C developed an in-house SE program to best serve the employment needs of consumers by strategically reallocating existing staff resources without additional external funding. The first two staff members selected to become ES were two individuals who expressed interest in pursuing SE training and volunteered to serve on the ESC. They were also experienced case managers who were highly adept at providing community-based services. They were particular skilled in advocacy, networking, and linking consumers to needed resources. These skills provided a good foundation for building new ones to become ES [12].

During the first six-month training period, the two specialists went through intensive SE training. A curriculum was developed with an employment consultant (EC). The training was typically biweekly, between three to five hours each time. The training curriculum was part of the regional training on employment related topics for mental health consumers, providers and family members. The topics included employment readiness assessment, vocational interest and preference assessment using Holland’s Self-Directed Search [4], developing vocational goals, individual placement and support (IPS) model of SE, integrating vocational and clinical services, developing support for employment, working with individuals with psychiatric and substance use issues, ADA and disclosure, SSI/SSDI benefits and work incentives, and community job development. These trainings were either provided by the EC on site at the agency or by the colleagues of the EC at a regional training site. Upon the completion of the six-month didactic training process, the two employment specialists took and passed a written test developed based on the training materials.

A six-month in-vivo training process followed immediately. Working with an EC (second author), the two ES began providing employment services to a few consumers. The EC worked side by side with the ES to teach skills and provide feedback. For example, the EC would model an SE intervention, such as vocational goal planning with a consumer for the ES. The ES then had the opportunity to provide the intervention, with the EC present to provide support and feedback. During the in-vivo training process, the EC reinforced an IPS approach towards providing SE services. The team integrated the vocational services with clinical treatment, focused on competitive employment as the goal, encouraged consumers to choose employment goals, provided on-going vocational assessments, developed continuous support and follow-along service, and provided benefits planning [1]. Towards the end of the six-month in-vivo training, the EC used monthly consultation with the ES to review case interventions and provide suggestions.

After one-year of didactic and in-vivo training, the two trained staff members fully functioned as ES and provided SE services to consumers in the independent living program. The SE services were well received and more consumers soon asked for the service. At the same time, one employment specialist was leaving Triple C, relocating to another state. Recognizing the increasing demand for SE services and facing the reality of the staff turn over issue, the agency management team decided to train three additional employment specialists each year for the next two years and expand SE service to all consumers including those residing in group homes. Thus by the end of the three-year initiative, a total of eight employment specialists were trained. One of the first trained specialists (third author) now supervises the SE program. Currently, the employment specialists work as a team providing services and meet minimally once a month for case reviews and support.

3. Results

Triple C achieved remarkable progress in assisting consumers with obtaining employment goals. The competitive employment rates among Triple C consumers at the start of the initiative were 13%. The employment rates increased to 26% after 12 months, 54% after 24 months, and the rate had since remained steadily above 50%. These outcomes reached or surpassed the projected goals set by ESC. Among the consumers achieving employment outcomes were residents in the 24-hour supervised group homes. These individuals all had a long history of hospitalizations and unemployment. Additionally, some consumers have received pay increases or promotions. Further, 18% of the consumers have returned to school or participated in job training programs. One consumer graduated with a Master’s degree. The SE program has also been successful in assisting participants with achieving employment goals in a variety of careers. For example, one consumer works as a peer counselor, another as a van driver at a community mental health program. Two consumers
Table 1
Organizational change strategies and interventions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational Change Strategies</th>
<th>Interventions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Education and communication</td>
<td>Provide notification to all stakeholders of the organizational change project. Provide information dissemination through formal and informal channels about the importance of the new service in the agency mission.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Participation and involvement</td>
<td>Afford the opportunity for staff and consumers to participate in designing the new service, including serving on the Steering Committee to spearhead the project and providing peer support.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Facilitation and support</td>
<td>Offer numerous trainings and opportunities to gain new skills. Supervisors listen to any concerns voiced by staff and consumers about the organizational change.</td>
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<td>4. Change driven by agency mission</td>
<td>Integrate psychiatric rehabilitation philosophy into agency practices.</td>
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<td>5. Urgency and inevitability</td>
<td>Information about the new SE services about change posted throughout agencies sites. Organizational change process highlighted at every formal and informal agency event.</td>
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are self-employed. One established a cleaning services business, and another has an on-line art design company. Several others work in retail and clerical positions. Additionally, three consumers work full time and receive benefits from their employment.

Furthermore, Triple C developed an organizational culture where employment is highly valued and promoted. Every consumer now receives a vocational assessment and goal planning upon admission. SE services are now accessible to all consumers at all locations. Additionally, all staff members receive an annual one-day in-house training on employment related topics. ES along with the consultants provide the in-house training. ES also continue to receive additional training on SE services (Table 1).

4. Discussion

Triple C's transformation and its achievements demonstrate that the key elements to consumer employment success are the organizational commitment to promoting work, building a culture that values work, setting measurable goals and involving consumers and staff in the process of change, and providing education and supports to staff and consumers in the process. Triple C overcame the usual obstacles that prevent mental health service providers from focusing on improving employment outcomes, including: (1) staff attitudes, (2) organizational barriers, and (3) the effective transfer of training to practice [13].

Although Triple C is primarily funded to provide residential services, the employment outcomes of above 50% competitively employed compare favorably to SE outcomes cited in the literature. For instance, Leff and colleagues [6] reported in a seven state Employment Demonstration Program that 43% of consumers obtained one or more competitive jobs. Roberts & Pratt [8] reviewed nine SE studies and found a competitive employment rate ranging from 20% to 78%. Therefore, Triple C's SE program produced outcomes that are well within the range of SE programs.

5. Limitations

The findings of this case study may be limited in that they are drawn from the experience of one organization serving 60 individuals in New Jersey. The ability to generalize from this experience to other service providers within or outside of New Jersey is unclear. However, the structure and operation of this agency are quite typical of residential services providers in general.

6. Conclusion

Triple C utilized its existing resources to develop an in-house SE program without additional funding or staffing. Triple C’s experience may provide some innovative ideas for other supportive housing agencies who are facing the demand for employment services, but at the same time lack funding or in-house expertise in providing employment services. Triple C’s experience may also provide evidence to those providers who still question consumers’ desire and ability to work. By adding in-house SE services, Triple C encouraged consumers who may have lost confidence in their ability to work to pursue employment goals. Furthermore, this project demonstrated that once a culture of higher expectations in the employment domain was in place, consumers are highly effective in encouraging and supporting peers in obtaining and maintaining employment.

References


