

I am a critical social worker who used my recent education – going through the BSW and MSW programs at York University – as a means of recovering from my personal experiences within the mental health system. In school I was able to start exploring the area of mental health recovery and have now become a mental health recovery educator. I am also a member of the Leadership Project which is a Toronto based committee that distributes educational materials on recovery and organizes recovery education events in Toronto.

In the Fall of 2004, Karyn Baker, another member of the Leadership Project, and myself were approached to help Houselink explore the concept of mental health recovery and also to hopefully initiate a change process within Houselink by introducing several recovery education projects involving staff in one stream and Houselink members in the other.

We started off the Staff Training project with a focus group of a dozen staff to help us get a sense of the challenges and issues facing housing support workers and also to hear the concerns of staff about implementing a recovery process at Houselink.

Next we conducted a Guided Reflection Workshop that involved all staff and management – 55 in total. This all day workshop included the following:

- viewing of the video “Inside-Outside” by Patricia Deegan – an excellent presentation of recovery stories from folks who have experienced long-term institutional care – More details on this video and the Guided Reflection are included on the CD.
- Some education around the concept of a “positive culture of healing” – that is exploring what is needed in the environment to nurture mental health recovery.
- The rest of the day was spent in small groups discussing the culture of healing at Houselink with respect to – climate within the agency, collaboration, consumer/survivor rights, and empowered staff.

At the end of the workshop some staff signed up for the first staff recovery training series which started up in mid January of this year.

The staff Recovery Training included a total of 23 staff, representing administration, maintenance, managers, front-line workers and one social work placement student. Over the 14 week class schedule we concentrated on the following topics:

- challenges and issues for workers in the field of mental health
- mental health recovery education facts and research information
- human rights & discrimination within the mental health system
- recovery practice skills that can impact motivation, stages of individual change, hope, and power relationships within a housing setting
- and finally, ways to create environments that nurture recovery, with an emphasis on the importance of relationship – building.

We had weekly reading assignments, self-reflection journaling and final projects where staff worked together in groups to plan a recovery project that involved any aspect of Houselink, from organizational structure to programming to individual work with members. As examples of these projects, Houselink now has a RAP song on recovery and a recovery resource library for all members and staff. A York MSW student worked with us to put a research component to the training – her findings have validated the impact of recovery education on staff attitudes in this setting. We are now currently part way through a second staff training series involving 19 more staff.

The second part of the recovery implementation included a program for Houselink members – Wellness Recovery Action Planning or WRAP. This is a USA based program developed by Mary Ellen Copeland – WRAP has now been recognized as an exemplary practice and has been widely implemented within 50 states in the USA, UK, and NZ. WRAP is a self-help program, where, within a group setting, individuals explore self-help wellness tools, like relaxation and stress reduction techniques, and other resources for keeping themselves well and for helping themselves feel better and in control in difficult times. We held WRAP information sessions at 3 sites in the Fall of 2004 and then in January of this year conducted 2 WRAP series at different sites – Broadview and Channon Court – which involved 15 members.

To date we've had one follow-up get-together of these WRAP participants to talk about next steps for recovery for members. Some ideas include a Facilitator Training Workshop to learn to facilitate WRAP sessions and a possible peer support program.

As I look back over my past year's involvement with Houselink, I have had a tremendous personal learning experience as a mental health recovery educator. I have also had a unique opportunity to observe the concepts of mental health recovery begin to percolate and take hold within a sizeable community mental health setting. This has not just been the case of "adding-on a few programs". I am delighted to be witnessing the values of recovery being implemented throughout the fabric of Houselink....and I see Houselink as a role model, particularly for other supported housing agencies – there is much to learn from their ongoing journey with recovery.