

## 4.5: Consumer Involvement

HCH services are completely dependent upon consumer involvement. Whether we use the term *consumer*, *patient*, *client*, *participant*, or *persons in recovery*, consumers of HCH services advise HCH projects, individual workers, and other consumers in a variety of significant ways. In this module, you will learn about federal criteria for consumer involvement in federally funded programs, see examples of the role of former and current consumers in designing health care delivery and recovery plans for patients experiencing homelessness, and list examples of how consumer involvement can facilitate the recovery process for people experiencing homelessness.

# Why involve consumers?



Photo by Sharon Morrison

- Human rights
- Only consumers know what consumers experience
- Federal requirements

Why involve consumers? First, because it is a basic principle of human rights that people be involved in making the decisions that effect their lives. Second, because only consumers know what consumers experience, and they can provide the best possible guidance regarding programs and interventions. In the reading assignment for this module, you will read about another answer: federal funding for HCH projects requires a 51% consumer majority on governance boards. You'll read about different ways that requirement can be met, but governance is only one of the ways consumers influence HCH service delivery.

# Advantages and Challenges



Source: Report of the Consumer Involvement Workgroup, SAMHSA

## Advantages:

- Promotes empathy for clients
- Stimulates professional development for consumers
- Strengthens agency decision-making
- Lends credibility to decisions

## Challenges:

- Boundary blurring
- Confidentiality
- Logistics (transportation, meeting timing)

A 2006 report on Consumer Involvement in PATH-Funded mental health programs, (Projects for Assistance in Transition out of Homelessness), detailed what HCH projects have experienced for years. Consumer involvement in homeless services holds numerous advantages and some challenges for service recipients, consumers themselves, and the programs that involve those consumers.

Advantages include the promotion of understanding of clients' realities, the stimulation of growth on the part of consumers, better-informed agency decisions, and increased credibility for agencies. Challenges revolve around issues of boundary-blurring, confidentiality and appropriate accommodations. Assuring meaningful consumer involvement requires deliberate, sustained effort on the part of HCH projects.

# Varieties of Consumer Involvement



- Boards of Directors
- Consumer Advisory Boards
- Advocacy
- Research

We have asked local HCH projects and their Consumer Advisory Boards to discuss with homeless people - HCH clients and others - your experiences with health care, and to record your experiences and ideas to help us as we advocate for a better system.

#### I. ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

- Have you ever been REFUSED health care that you sought, including treatment for physical health, mental health, dental, or alcohol or drug problems?
- Why were you refused?
- Who refused treatment (hospital, emergency room, community health center, HCH project, private doctor)?
- About how many times has this happened to you?

#### II. HEALTH AND HOMELESSNESS

- Has being homeless ever caused you to get sick or be injured?
- Has homelessness ever made your health problems worse?

#### III. HOSPITALS AND HOMELESSNESS

- Have you ever lost your home while you were in a hospital or a treatment facility?
- Have you ever been discharged from a hospital or treatment facility directly to the streets or shelters?
- Have you ever been discharged before you were well and able to be on your own?

#### IV. SOLUTIONS

- What is the most important thing that could be done to improve homeless people's health?
- What is the most important thing that could be done to end homelessness?

Excerpt from past CAB survey

As you will read in the Summary of Governance Requirements, consumers can serve in an advisory capacity through either the center's Board of Directors or through a Consumer Advisory Board. In the video that follows, you'll hear specific examples of consumers influencing decision-making in both ways.

Consumers are also essential contributors to advocacy at local, state, and national levels. Homeless Persons' Memorial Day is one annual, nationwide example of consumers raising awareness about the hundreds of people who die homeless each year.

Consumers also conduct research on the quality of HCH services and other issues of importance to homeless persons. Consumers gather input on both local clinic services and nationwide trends.

The National Consumer Advisory Board within the National HCH Council promotes and supports these activities, and has published a manual for local Consumer Advisory Boards, called CABs.

“Summary of Health Care for the Homeless  
Consumer Governance Requirements”

## **Reading Assignment 4.5**