



## **Key Characteristics of Exemplary Behavioral Health Programs**

There is a long history of spirituality in addictions treatment and current thinking emphasizes the involvement of faith organizations as an element in the treatment process. For over 25 years, PHMC has provided behavioral health services for vulnerable populations in the Philadelphia area through a continuum of services from residential through outpatient.

Interviews with the Vice President of PHMC's Behavioral Health component, and the directors of two residential behavioral health programs identified the following characteristics of exemplary programs.

### **Key Characteristics**

**Staffing:** Exemplary programs have strong, caring, nonjudgmental staff with a mix of demographic characteristics and skills. Treatment programs should have treatment teams for each participant, with clinical, psychiatric, peer support, social services fields all represented. Therapists and psychiatrists are important for individual evaluation and to provide direction for treatment. These clinical staff need strong education backgrounds and treatment experience. Programs also should include staff in recovery, ideally at both the clinical and paraprofessional level. Beyond treatment staff, programs need to have staff to address overall client "wellness" and to care for children, so that participants can fully concentrate on their own recovery.

Regardless of the staff position, it is important to have stable and consistent staffing over time, as stable relationships between staff and clients are very important to recovery. Many persons in treatment for addictions have not experienced healthy and consistent relationships with other people. Constant turnover at a program interrupts a person's recovery journey and increases the likelihood of relapse.

**Volunteers:** Volunteers can make major contributions to programs for individuals who are in recovery from substance use. Contributions can include assisting with childcare, working in a donation room or kitchen. It is critical that volunteers have child abuse clearance, abide by a code of ethics and have some training in addictions. Without this training, volunteers may not understand some of the program rules and "may think that they are helping when they are not." Addictions treatment is an extremely sensitive health topic and volunteers must be trained on how to deal with potentially risky situations. Programs can provide a volunteer role for individuals who are in recovery, although awareness of relapse potential is critical. A volunteer coordinator is critical for these programs.

**Philosophy of Empowerment:** An exemplary program focuses on empowering consumers and giving them a voice rather than using a top down approach that assumes that the program staff know what the consumer needs. One of the residential treatment



program directors noted that, “Clients bring a lot of knowledge, survival skills and strength. Involving our clients has been a positive for the staff too.” Exemplary programs build on these strengths to ensure that the consumer has a voice and is able to make choices. This includes building in a mechanism to enable consumers/participants to provide feedback on what is and is not working in the program from their viewpoint.

***Holistic Approach:*** Moving individuals towards self-sufficiency is key to an exemplary program, and requires providing access to life skills training and resources (e.g. education classes, employment counseling), as well as exposing participants to a range of activities and experiences that promote both physical and emotional health. One program has a popular knitting group, which teaches the participants how to occupy their leisure time. Preventing boredom is critical to preventing relapse, so programs should introduce different hobbies and activities to teach participants new ways of spending their time. Helping participants find meaning and purpose in life is key to preventing relapse.

***Safety:*** Many people in behavioral health programs have histories of abuse so the issue of a safe environment is especially important. An exemplary program emphasizes the safety of both staff and program participants. This includes assuring physical safety and comfort as well as safety from social and moral abuse. Mutual respect between staff and participants promotes a feeling of “connection” and this also promotes safety.

***Peer Support:*** It is important for program participants to have opportunities to share their stories and current struggles with others who are also in recovery from addiction. Sometimes, persons in recovery will trust and learn more from a peer who has already gone through treatment compared to a therapist who may not know what addictions recovery truly feels like. Having peer support groups also allows alumni of programs to give back to the program that helped them and experience a sense of accomplishment.

***Childcare:*** Exemplary programs that serve families have staff to provide childcare so that parents and caregivers can participate in activities that will help with their recovery, such as peer support groups, AA meetings, and promote self-sufficiency.

***Space:*** Programs for persons in recovery can be located in a variety of settings as long as they are accessible to the people they are serving and provide a clean, bright, homey and comfortable environment. Light is particularly important as dark spaces may make people feel that they are being hidden away from the larger community. Also, it may make them feel as if they should be ashamed of their addiction. Groups work best when seats are in a circle to promote sharing.

***Community Involvement:*** Individuals in recovery from addiction can benefit from community involvement at two levels. The first is by taking advantage of community resources that help them move towards self-sufficiency. The second is by encouraging participants to give their time and energy back to the community. Many addicted individuals feel isolated from family and community and have not had healthy role models. Being part of the community can help them get outside of themselves and



experience the “joy of giving back.” Programs can encourage program participants to “give back” to the community in many ways, including volunteering at schools, nursing homes, or taking other kids on trips. Successful programs provide opportunities for participants to connect with community resources, either for personal development or for volunteering.

### **Issues Specific to Congregation-Based Behavioral Health Programs**

Locating a program in a congregation setting can be positive for addiction programs because it may seem more community-based, more approachable and less threatening to potential participants than other settings. For individuals who have been in a residential program, a relationship with a congregation can also provide an anchor for them when they leave.

However, there are some potential barriers for congregations to hosting successful programs. Due to space and resource limits, congregation programs are frequently held in basements that are dark, cold and not inviting. Also, some congregations require that program participants attend services as part of the program. While attendance for faith services can be a way for program participants to feel connected to the community and find a sense of personal meaning, attendance should not be mandatory.

Overall, programs that provide treatment for addiction require a level of staffing and professional experience and training that may be difficult for congregation-based programs to achieve. A congregation can still serve this vulnerable population, however, by providing supportive services such as peer support groups or childcare, either in the community or onsite at the program.