



Supporting Consumers of Mental Health Services and their Families and Natural Supports

All people, including people with mental illnesses interact with family members and natural supports in daily life. This document will outline the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Manitoba's position on the role of family members and natural supports in the recovery¹ process of a person with a mental illness and within CMHA. CMHA is committed to:

- **Providing consumers of mental health services the *option* to include their family members and natural supports in their recovery process.**
- **Recognizing family members and natural supports of consumers as a constituency in their own right, who are a valuable resource and have unique mental health needs.**

Supporting consumers of mental health services

CMHA promotes a person-centered approach to mental health policy. A critical aspect of the person-centered approach is respect for the decision-making capacity of people with mental illnesses. We recognize that family members and natural supports can be a key component of a successful recovery from mental illness; we also acknowledge that there are times when a person with a mental illness may not wish family to be involved. Many consumers have experienced rejection, denial, abuse, and violence. Unfortunately, some have experienced this from their families and natural supports. As a result, some consumers may choose not to involve family in their recovery process because they believe the relationships are harmful to their recovery. CMHA will respect the decisions of consumers who may not want their family members or natural supports involved.

Supporting the family members and natural supports of consumers

With the permission of the consumer, CMHA believes there are a variety of roles that his or her family members and natural supports can potentially occupy. Primarily, CMHA's "Community Resource Base" recognizes that family members and natural supports can be an essential part of recovery for some people with mental illnesses. Although their role is generally under-recognized, families and natural supports are the single largest group of support providers, often providing financial, emotional and social support.

Secondarily, CMHA acknowledges that consumer's family members and natural supports possess an extensive knowledge of the day-to-day realities of mental health problems as well as have an immediate stake in mental health and the service system. Thus, there is potential for family members and natural supports of consumers to broaden our knowledge resource base.

¹ According to CMHA's guiding document, *A Framework for Support*, "recovery" is described as gaining control over one's life and the illness; it is a nuanced phenomenon that may coexist with ongoing symptoms (2004).

Finally, CMHA is committed to providing supports and services to family members and natural supports of people with mental health concerns. CMHA is committed to mental health promotion for all, as indicated in our vision for “mentally healthy people in a healthy society.” CMHA recognizes the mental health needs of family members and natural supports of people with mental illnesses. When a consumer is in crisis, often, so is the family.

Action plan

CMHA in Manitoba is committed to the meaningful participation of consumers and their families and natural supports through:

A Person-centred approach/Community resource base

While respecting the consumer’s wishes first, the potential for family members and natural supports to contribute to a consumer’s recovery process will be recognized through involvement in direct service. CMHA will provide information about the different roles family members and natural supports can play in the recovery process. Family member and natural supports can be involved in service planning with the consumer when both provider and consumer agree that it would be helpful.

Knowledge resource base

The experiential knowledge of consumers, their family members and natural supports will be recognized in three areas:

- a) Governance. CMHA will provide opportunities for participation in setting the direction of the organization and the evaluation of organizational performance. This will most likely take the form of consultation.
- b) Planning and developing of services. CMHA will encourage representation in various forums where services are being planned and/or evaluated.
- c) Employment and training. Experience as a consumer, family member or natural support will be considered an asset for employment when the applicant has met job requirements. CMHA will provide training for staff about effective collaboration with family members and natural supports.

Services

CMHA acknowledges that family members have distinct issues and needs and therefore services need to be offered to respond to those issues and needs. CMHA will develop and provide services to the families and natural supports such as advocacy services, support groups, guidance about how to navigate the mental health service sector, and provision of educational resources.

Conclusion

CMHA strives to support families and natural supports of mental health consumers recognizing that they are key players and change agents with a wealth of practical and experiential knowledge in the area of mental health. However, with regards to individual recovery plans, the decisions of the consumer will be respected.

The Canadian Mental Health Association is a nation-wide, voluntary organization that promotes the mental health of all and supports the resilience and recovery of people experiencing mental illness. CMHA accomplishes this mission through advocacy, education, research and service. CMHA’s mission is framed by a vision of mentally healthy people in a healthy society.

Resources

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