



Consumer Quality Initiatives, Inc.

132 Kemble St.
Roxbury, MA 02119
Phone (617) 427-0505
www.cqi-mass.org

Adolescent Focus Groups Report DMH Northeast and Metro-Suburban Areas

INTRODUCTION

The Massachusetts Department of Mental Health (DMH) contracted with CQI to conduct a series of focus groups with adult and youth mental health consumers and family members across the state to help inform their Unified Behavioral Health planning process.

One area of interest for DMH is the needs and experiences of children and adolescents in the mental health system. This report presents themes that arose from two focus groups with adolescents on their experiences in the mental health system, paying particular attention to normal development processes. Participants in one focus group were asked about coordination of care, but this was not an area they could comment on so the conversation focused on their experiences in programs and what would have improved their experience.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Many youth felt that their programs had helped them by removing them from bad environments, providing insight and education, and giving them the support of community.
- While many youth saw value in rules related to safety, many expressed dissatisfaction with how some hospitals and programs overemphasized on rules.
- Most youth appreciated it when staff treated them normally, nonjudgmentally and respectfully.
- A major concern of youth was developing and maintaining positive friendships and relationships at programs, in the community and when making transitions.
- Youth wanted more active activities and opportunities for employment. They also wanted activities that made them feel integrated into the community, not segregated.
- Many youth faced challenges with schooling. Several youth found that specialized schools were helpful because of the added support and the reduction of ostracism from peers.

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

CQI conducted two focus groups with adolescents: one at the Children's Community Support Collaborative in Brighton on April 5, 2006, and the other at American Training, Inc. in Lawrence on April 12, 2006. There were a total of 23 participants, including people of white/Caucasian, African-American, and Latino/Hispanic heritage. Most youth in the focus groups had been in hospitals, residential facilities and group homes. Most were currently living in a group home.

THEMES

Overemphasis on Rules

Most participants recognized the need for residential/hospital rules, but many felt that the rules were overdone, and were applied indiscriminately and without regard to the needs of the individual¹. For example, many youth found restrictions placed on phone calls and phone contacts to be detrimental to maintaining good outside relationships. Many youth found some rules to be unrealistic and unhelpful for their growth. They thus sometimes wanted to break rules not related to safety because they infringed on their sense of independence. Programs need to find ways to support adolescents' growing need for autonomy in decision-making and independence.

How Programs Have Helped

The youth noted a wide range of ways that the care received from hospitals, residential programs and outpatient programs had helped. Many youth stated that being at a program got them away from bad situations or environments, particularly involving their families, schools and neighborhoods. Several said that being in a program prevented them from committing self harm/suicide or ending up on the streets.

Many youth mentioned the support and kindness of a community, especially the staff and other young adults, as one of the best aspects of their programs. Several gained a greater understanding of themselves, their problems and how to deal with them. They said that the program helped them through their struggles. Many youth believed their program allowed them to interact with others. As one youth said, *"It made me realize I'm not alone, that there are people like me who are going through similar things."*

Positive Relationships with Staff

Many youth cited their relationships with staff as important to their growth and satisfaction with a program. These youth preferred staff that listen, are supportive of their needs, are respectful, and give advice. As one satisfied youth said, "Staff is nonjudgmental, understands you, accepts you the way you are; they don't judge you."

Many people mentioned that their DMH case manager was supportive when they were in the hospital, including visiting them in the hospital. Youth also said they appreciated time spent with their advocate. It was important for individual attention, going out into the

¹ Particularly those who believed that they were not causing trouble.

community, getting fresh air and bonding. Because this time was so valued, some people wished that they were allowed to switch advocates if they were unhappy.

Some youth felt that staff competence varied from program to program. One said that at the hospital, *“The staff treated you normally, but here [at the group home] they think you’re bad kids.”*

Friendships

For many youth, developing and maintaining positive friendships is extremely important because they face isolation and ostracism from peers in the community. Programs need to find ways to encourage and support positive friendships, so that youth have a sense of normalcy and personal support.

Rather than banning certain friendships, program staff could help youth weigh the positives and negatives of their friendships wherever they developed, in the community or in programs.

1) Friendships in the community

Many youth experienced difficulty developing and maintaining friendships in the community as a result of entering a residential program. Some youth stated that entering a program resulted in their outside friendships dropping off, often because of stigma and fear. For many other youth, participation in their program restricted their ability to develop and maintain outside friendships.

These youth want to get more than brief, restricted visitations with their friends, and better opportunities to “hang out.” They found the restrictive phone policies troubling, in that they were not often given the freedom to talk to friends.

2) Friendships in the Programs

One rule that troubled a large number of youth was the rule that they are not supposed to make friends with other youth in programs. They found it unrealistic and unhelpful. Often making friends in a program is the only opportunity youth have to develop friendship with peers. One youth said, “If I went home now I wouldn’t have any friends; I have friends in the program.” Several people mentioned the support of others in program: “The kids understand each other.”

Youth said that making friends in programs gave them confidence and the skills to make better choices with friendships. Rather than discourage friendships, programs should find ways of supporting the positive, encouraging friendship youth make in programs and recognize that peers are an important source of support for youth.

3) Friendships during a Transition

More attention needs to be paid to helping youth maintain and normalize friendships and relationships when they are making a transition, either from home to a program, when switching programs, or when returning home. Some people expressed unhappiness with the process for leaving programs. “When changing programs, it happens too fast – it’s

unfair to lose your friendships that way.” Some people felt the transition could be made easier. Youth suggested expanding call lists and letting them keep in touch with friends they make in programs.

Participation in Normal Activities

Allowing youth to have greater input into the selection and planning of activities would create feelings of empowerment. Youth had many ideas about what types of activities they wanted. In short, youth wanted more active activities, and opportunities for employment, particularly in the summer. They said they were particularly in need of fun activities such as trips to state parks and amusement parks in the summer. They wanted activities that made them feel integrated into the community, not segregated.

Many youth expressed a desire to participate in normal activities, such as hanging out with friends or playing video games. Some were also interested in social activities with youth from other programs.

School Issues

Many youth described problems that they were experiencing at school before entering their programs, particularly maltreatment by peers, isolation and loss of friendships. Many felt that going to a new school was helpful. Several people however commented on the difficulties of changing schools, especially if it happened frequently.

Several youth felt that alternative schools better met their needs. Specialized schools were helpful because of the added support from staff and the reduction of ostracism from peers. As one youth said, “*The smaller alternative schools are better. There’s more support and focus on you.*” A few youth desired improved academics at the alternative schools.

For more information, contact Jonathan Delman, 617-427-0505, jdelman@cqi-mass.org
132 Kemble Street * Roxbury, MA 02119