Leveling the Playing Field: Practical Strategies for Increasing Veterans' Involvement in Diversion and Reentry Programs

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The findings and directives issued by the President's New Freedom Commission (2002) regarding the development of a system that is consumer and family driven have led many states and their partners to increase their efforts to involve consumers along a continuum of core activities for justice-involved consumers. Jail diversion and prison reentry programs have been at the forefront in integrating consumers in activities, ranging from participation in local and statewide advisory groups to becoming dedicated staff members.

Nevertheless, states and communities encounter significant difficulties in engaging consumers and sustaining their involvement. This is especially acute when veterans are a primary program target group. Reciprocally, veterans and other consumers experience difficulties in their efforts to participate as full partners in jail diversion and prison reentry activities. These activities present new and exciting opportunities for people with lived experience to become actively involved in reshaping policies and practices that impact upon their daily lives. Consumers in the context of this paper include veterans with personal lived experiences with mental illness, incarceration, and substance abuse.

Over the course of providing technical assistance to 34 communities in the SAMHSA Targeted Capacity Expansion Grants for Jail Diversion Programs since 2002, we have witnessed a recognizable shift from encouraging involvement to requiring the involvement and support of persons with lived experiences in these activities. The rush to quickly engage and involve consumers, however, has not necessarily resulted in the reexamination of policies and practices inconsistent with promoting and sustaining involvement. In many instances these policies and practices inhibit meaningful peer involvement and create significant obstacles to full inclusion. While veterans and other consumers welcome these new opportunities, the invitation to participate is a nominal first step in ensuring and supporting the involvement of individuals with histories of incarceration in jail diversion and prison reentry projects and similar criminal justice and mental health initiatives.

The lack of attention given to identifying and addressing these obstacles is due to the fact that they are all but invisible to other stakeholders and other priorities that must be addressed by project managers during the start-up phases of many projects. Quite simply, the emphasis is on who must be at the table and not on developing systems to ensure peer involvement. These policies and practices do not intentionally target people with lived experiences for different treatment nor do they explicitly place limitations on their involvement. They were adopted when peer involvement was neither contemplated nor encouraged. Nevertheless, these facially neutral policies and practices can, and often do, have a disparate impact on veterans and other similarly situated stakeholders, particularly those with histories of incarceration.

These policies and practices are not flexible and do not allow for the exercise of discretion. Most importantly, they fail to make the accommodations needed to directly address the disparities in the personal and organizational resources of individual stakeholders and stakeholder groups. Thus, state staff members are unable to promulgate policies and practices that are in alignment with their desire to engage veterans, sustain their involvement, and create new roles and responsibilities for their veteran partners.

These policies and practices can be divided into three, sometimes overlapping, categories: (1) financial disparities (compensation, payment advances, and reimbursement); (2) eligibility and access (real or implied limitations on access or eligibility); and (3) experiential differences and preparedness (readiness to participate and resources allocated to preparing participants and supporting their involvement). These policies and practices have an especially significant impact upon the ability of jail diversion, prison reentry, and other criminal justice/mental health initiative programs to engage and sustain the involvement of individuals with histories of

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incarceration—people who tend to have even fewer resources at their disposal and less experience.

There are two unintended consequences of these types of polices and practices: state staff find themselves unable to "level the playing field" and realistically address the resource disparities among stakeholders, and veterans are unable or unwilling to participate in activities that create additional hardships for themselves. The net result is that consumer involvement is negatively impacted, and many stakeholders conclude that the consumer voice is not essential to moving forward. Just as we have embarked upon significant efforts to transform the mental health and criminal justice systems, we must initiate complementary and necessary efforts to alter how we treat stakeholder partners. Project managers are encouraged to take a leadership role in proactively identifying potential obstacles and taking key action steps to eliminate them.

Leveling the playing field is essential to ensuring that the involvement of people with lived experience is not nominal and illusory, but instead is real and provides significant opportunities for the development and support of veterans leadership in jail diversion, prison reentry, and other critical activities.

Financial Disparities

Highly restrictive state policies adopted to minimize risk and loss frequently create significant obstacles to consumer engagement and involvement. Consumers are among the poorest citizens in our communities and often do not have personal income sufficient to sustain their voluntary involvement in regional and statewide activities; veterans, as a member of this class because of often complex eligibility criteria for VA benefits and a lack of awareness regarding their eligibility for other entitlements, may be without any source of income. The out-of-pocket expenses associated with criminal justice and mental health activities often create undue hardship because of the personal expenses incurred as a result of participating in these types of activities.

Expenses for travel, accommodations, and meals can significantly add to the out-of-pocket expenses that a stakeholder absorbs (or temporarily absorbs until reimbursement) as a condition of participating in criminal justice initiatives. Unfortunately, not all stakeholders can absorb, albeit temporarily, these kinds of expenses. Since many veterans are volunteering their services or working for organizations that cannot compensate them for time spent working on activities not directly related to their employment responsibilities, paying these expenses frequently results in undue hardship. Many continue to participate at a great personal and financial cost because, unlike other stakeholders, most are subsisting on limited incomes that provide very little disposable or discretionary money. By virtue of their independence and reluctance at asking for assistance, this particular issue severely impacts upon veterans. Consumers as a class are called upon to make significant sacrifices to sustain their involvement and often make very informed decisions about their ability or inability to continue to remain involved.

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Unfortunately, project management and staff are sometimes largely unaware of these financial barriers. Stakeholders may be uncomfortable discussing personal financial matters, and managers and staff may be equally uncomfortable in having to process this information. Because of self-stigmatization and shame, many elect to end their involvement rather than create unreasonable risks to their financial stability. The "don't ask and don't tell" approach to discussing and addressing these financial barriers leads to resentments and misunderstandings. The lack of discussions and proactive planning to eliminate these risks for veterans and other similarly situated stakeholders frequently results in last minute ad hoc solutions that do not provide permanent relief. Ad hoc policies and practices do not fundamentally alter the way that systems do business with consumers as a whole, and thus the same issues are revisited with the start of each new project or initiative. This transformation requires the adoption and implementation of fair and equitable policies to reduce the personal and financial obstacles that stakeholders are expected to endure as a condition of their involvement.

For example, state agency reimbursement systems by their nature do not take into account that many consumers may not have the resources to pay out-of-pocket expenses and await the typical 30-day turnaround for reimbursements. Reimbursement systems indirectly assume that individuals have cash or credit to pay for their own expenses and await repayment.

Eligibility and Access

Project managers and other senior staff cannot assume that all stakeholders will be able to meet the same set of criteria in order to participate in activities. Unfortunately, individuals with histories of incarceration may have limitations placed upon their ability to participate in some activities or tasks due to their criminal history. These individuals may have restrictions placed upon their ability to visit places such as jails, prisons, and other correctional facilities. This is especially so where an individual is on parole or probation. The express terms of probation or parole may prohibit contact with others with criminal convictions and the visiting of correctional facilities. Similarly, limitations may restrict travel and set curfews. Project managers must anticipate that some limitations may apply and be prepared to assist these individuals in obtaining the modifications needed to permit full participation in project activities.

For example, many correctional facilities have restrictions upon visits by individuals on parole, probation, and felony convictions. Exceptions are not made for volunteers or employees visiting a facility for purposes related to the work they are doing. In response to this problem, many jail diversion and reentry programs have entered memoranda of understanding with the correctional facilities they will be working in. These memoranda expressly set out the terms and conditions of access to these facilities. Here it is important to note that veteran volunteers and staff must be carefully instructed regarding the rules and regulations within each facility. For instance, giving a prisoner money, cigarettes, or other items generally violates corrections policy. Neither the status of the giver nor the intent of the gift impacts upon the applicability of the policy. Violations may result in the temporary suspension or the termination of visiting privileges, or the placement of additional restrictions upon the peer staff or volunteers. Consequently, special attention must be paid to ensure that peer staff and volunteers fully understand these policies and appreciate the impact that violations may have upon the project.

Terms and conditions of parole and probation can be modified to permit consumers to engage in activities essential to the performance of their roles in the project. However, these modifications must be negotiated with the parole officer/probation officer and this requires the involvement and advocacy of project staff. Project staff must demonstrate the importance of the consumer's participation and the ongoing support and supervision of the consumer in these activities. Anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that community supervision staff are receptive to modifying these restrictions when they are provided with the information necessary to make an informed decision. Participation in these activities further demonstrates rehabilitation and reintegration into community life. Most importantly, it creates significant opportunities for personal and professional growth—milestones critical to reducing recidivism.

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Project managers may be called upon to take an active role in insuring that individuals with histories of incarceration are able to enjoy full participation in all project activities to fully utilize the skills and expertise of peers. This activism also increases the insight of all stakeholders into the formidable obstacles that individuals with histories of incarceration face on a daily basis. Establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships with community supervision staff is an added benefit that can enrich and inform the knowledge of all stakeholders and partner agencies.

Experiential Disparities and Preparedness

Until fairly recently, consumers, including veterans, with histories of incarceration were not actively recruited as valued and essential partners in jail diversion and reentry projects. While many may have previous advocacy experience, others may be unfamiliar with the roles and responsibilities attendant on participation in the various regional and statewide bodies that are created to plan, implement, evaluate, and provide operational oversight for jail diversion and reentry projects. The same may be said of other stakeholders; however, existing networks and mentors may assist others in more quickly overcoming the often steep learning curve. Lack of information regarding why their involvement is being sought and what is expected of them all too frequently results in mutual frustration. Consumers are frustrated because they are not quite sure why they are there and what they should do, and project managers frequently bemoan the lack of input and participation from consumers.

While some stakeholders may have some experience with group work and consensus building, others—including some veterans—may not. It is important to develop policies and practices that prepare members for the processes they will be participating in and the intended outcomes. Similarly, people with lived experiences bring critical information and insight to discussions that should not be marginalized because of their unfamiliarity with the ways of doing business.

There is frequently a lack of diversity among individuals who are invited to become formally involved in these activities. This trend can probably be attributed to the often limited relationships the state staff have with consumers and consumer-operated services, creating a tendency to invite the same people all the time. This tendency preempts the involvement of veterans who may not be personally known to project staff but who may be able to make significant contributions. Project staff have to both increase their knowledge of the wide range of consumer- and veteran-operated services in their state and develop meaningful professional relationships with the leaders of these organizations. In addition, innovative recruitment and engagement methods may be needed to identify consumers, especially veterans, with histories of incarceration because many have no affiliation with traditional consumer-operated services or elect not to disclose their criminal justice histories with the consumer- and veteran-operated services and networks they are affiliated with. Emphasizing the importance of previous involvement with the criminal justice system and how this status will be disclosed to other stakeholders may attract additional interest from veterans.

Project managers must carefully balance the needs of the "initiated" with those of the "uninitiated" and create a meeting environment that is both task oriented yet welcoming to various skill levels and experience. Formal orientation for all stakeholders helps, and conveners and facilitators must carefully balance their need to get the work done with the desired outcome of welcoming everyone at the table. Organized orientation sessions, coupled with mentoring and support from others at the table, creates a supportive environment where everyone learns from and about each other.

Practical Steps

➔ Fiscal Action Steps

Below are some practical action steps that project managers can take to level the financial playing field to ensure that involvement of people with lived experiences is not unfairly driven or impacted by the ability to pay.

1 Review existing policies and practices regarding prepaying, cash advances, and reimbursements.

State agencies and organizations are encouraged to conduct this review as soon as possible and before embarking on any major initiative calling for the involvement of consumers.

Meeting conveners and other stakeholders should review with fiscal officers and key participants current policies regarding prepaying expenses, cash advances, and reimbursements to identify policies and practices that may cause financial hardship.

2 Modify policies and practices to eliminate or mitigate disparate impact on participants.

Once policies and practices have been identified, a concerted effort should be made to eliminate or mitigate fiscal policies that have a disparate impact on participants. Although state government policies vary, it is important to work closely with fiscal staff to, wherever possible, modify these policies and practices and obtain the necessary approvals to implement changes. For example, Texas provides prepaid credit cards from the state's banking institution to pay for travel, food, and other incidental expenses. This eliminates the need for participants to expend their own funds when engaged in sponsored activities, serves as the "security" required for hotel-related expenses, and also provides records of expenditures.

Concerns about the abuse and misuse of the prepaid cards may be an issue for some state agencies and organizations. It is important not to assume that consumers are looking to "get over" on the system. This charge has been made on numerous occasions in response to irregularities or other problems; however, educating individuals about what expenses may be charged to the prepaid card generally cuts down on the abuse or misuse of the cards.

Cash advances may also be used; however, it is critical that the process for requesting and obtaining a cash advance be simple and user friendly. For example, where attendees are coming from throughout the state, provisions should be made for the request to be completed via telephone or fax rather than in-person through a signed request.

Similarly, forms used to make these requests should be as clear and simple as possible, with clear instructions provided as to how to complete the form. Deadlines for making these requests should be reasonable and well publicized. Timelines for reimbursement for expenses should also be reasonable and, wherever possible, the turnaround time from submission to receipt of reimbursement check should balance the fiscal operations schedule (when checks are written) with the desire to quickly reimburse for expenses. Collaboration with fiscal staff quite often results in modified schedules that are a win/win for all parties. However, these modifications cannot be made if the fiscal department is not made aware of the needs a person is trying to meet and the hardships that he or she is trying to avoid.

It is also important that accommodations be made for people with disabilities such as blindness or physical disabilities, as well as for those for whom English is a second language.

3 Identify key fiscal staff to liaison with consumers.

Wherever possible, it is important to designate a staff member or group of staff who will be the primary fiscal contact(s). Many participants have complained about not being able to find someone who would talk to them about the issues discussed above. Whether it is learning how to fill out a form, following up on reimbursements, or addressing other financial concerns, having a clear point of contact minimizes the confusion for everyone. It also insures that accurate and consistent information is provided and helps quickly resolve problems when they arise.

4 Conduct informational sessions about fiscal rules and responsibilities.

The most frequent response of participants when mistakes happen is that they were ignorant of a particular policy or practice. It is important to educate all partners about these important policies and practices. A short and readable handbook or handout may work well. We have found that a verbal recitation of policies and practices frequently leads to misunderstandings. Although a handbook or handout may not address all questions and issues, it can address the most common ones.

5 Fiscal pass through with consumer-run organizations.

Many states and localities have avoided the stringent restrictions on advances and compensation by subcontracting with a consumer-operated program to provide these services. These organizations have developed infrastructures and policies that permit the dispensing of cash for travel, per diem, and other expenses incurred by stakeholders involved in statewide and national activities. Project directors are strongly encouraged to consider this as an option. It is also strongly recommended that consumer-operated services receive an administrative fee for their services.

➔ Access and Eligibility Steps

These action steps are designed to assist project managers in proactively addressing any potential restrictions upon the access to particular sites and locations as well as any restrictions placed upon people with lived experience as a result of the terms and conditions of their parole, probation, or other terms of community supervision. It is important to stress that community supervision leadership and staff must be part of this problem-solving process.

6 Develop a comprehensive strategy to identify and address restrictions.

It is advisable for project staff to assume that there are formal and informal policies and practices that may impact upon the ability of people with histories of incarceration to share the same rights and privileges accorded other stakeholders. It is imperative that staff proactively engage community supervision, correctional staff, and internal agency staff to identify potential obstacles. It is equally important that they work with these stakeholders to eliminate or, at a minimum, modify policies and practices that negatively impact upon people with histories of incarceration. Program managers may be required to present justifications and rationales for these changes. Information provided to these stakeholders should include a program/project description, clear description of the roles and responsibilities of participants, and the level of support that they will provide. In general, a memorandum of understanding that clearly sets out the roles and responsibilities of the project staff, consumer partners, corrections staff, and community supervision is the recommended strategy.

Similarly, agencies regulating provider agencies often express restrictions on the employment of individuals with criminal records. These restrictions vary from state to state; project managers should be aware of such restrictions before the hiring process begins. Establishing relationships with national and state-wide advocacy organizations that have researched these issues and often can provide clear guidance on the implications for your hiring process is critical to ensuring that applicants, supervisory staff, and human resources staff are aware of the strategies that can be employed to facilitate the hiring of people with lived experience.

Finally, human resource policies must be aligned with efforts to employ people with histories of incarceration. Project managers should have a clear understanding of the recruitment and hiring process and be able to clearly communicate this process to applicants.

7 Actively engage community supervision and corrections leadership.

People with histories of incarceration who are also on parole or probation may face additional obstacles that create unique challenges for program staff; however, these challenges can be viewed as opportunities to engage leadership in these areas. Notwithstanding the expressed terms of the conditions of parole or probation, these terms and conditions can often be modified with the consent of these agencies. However, leadership of these agencies will require background information similar to that described above. Programs may also be required to provide updates regarding a participant's progress.

It must be emphasized that veterans must consent to the release of such information and project staff should explain the nature and purpose of these disclosures. Requests for permission to travel or extension of a curfew must be made in advance and in writing. Engaging community supervision leadership facilitates a greater understanding of the work, expectations, and goals of all the players. It also avoids the confusion caused by a lack of information and the negative impact that lack of awareness of these policies can have on participants, project staff, and the overall operations of the project. Most importantly, it creates opportunities to develop mutually beneficial relationships with the key stakeholders in jail diversion and prison reentry programs that provide long-term benefits to the staff and service recipients in these programs.

8 Support participants through this process.

The processes described above can be challenging for participants in many ways. First of all, they often require the disclosure of personal information. They also serve as a reminder that, as a class, consumers continue to be treated differently than many other stakeholders. This is particularly true for veterans for whom a criminal conviction may bear a particular badge of dishonor and shame. However, project managers can play a key role in supporting participants through this process. Below are some practical suggestions:

- Be proactive, don't wait until a problem or issue arises before taking action;
- Do not avoid the engagement and involvement of individuals who are currently on parole or probation;
- Learn about consumer-operated programs in your community that can provide peer support and assist individuals in successfully navigating the criminal justice system;
- Assure participants that their disclosures to you are confidential and will not be shared with other stakeholders; and
- Utilize knowledge obtained during this process to identify opportunities for additional systems

changes in related areas such as housing and competitive employment.

➔ Experiential and Preparedness Steps

Preparing participants for the expectations and demands of the work is critical to success and satisfaction on the part of all parties. While these action steps focus on consumer involvement, they are practices that will benefit all stakeholders and their satisfaction with the process. Orientation programs allow participants to not only understand their particular roles and responsibilities, but the roles and responsibilities of others. Orientations also provide critical information about the project. This information helps all stakeholders understand the functioning of the process and what they can reasonably expect from it.

9 Design and provide formal orientation for members.

It is generally a good idea to provide a formal orientation that provides stakeholders with the following information:

- Introduction of key players and roles
- Review of task descriptions and responsibilities
- Expectations regarding participation and attendance
- Review of fiscal policies and practices
- List of partners and contact information
- Goals for group
- Timetables
- Schedule of upcoming meetings
- Discussion of reasonable accommodations
- Opportunities to debrief meeting experience

10 Provide clear task descriptions detailing roles and responsibilities.

The development of task descriptions defining the roles and responsibilities of consumer partners serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it gives the program manager an opportunity to engage in a thoughtful and deliberate process of examining all of the potential roles and responsibilities for consumer partners. Secondly, it clearly outlines the skills, interests, and experience needed to perform specific tasks and responsibilities. Finally, including the level of time commitment, travel, and deliverables allows each participant or the organization that he/she represents makes an informed decision about participating. The outcome of such a process clarifies mutual expectations and goals thereby reducing the likelihood of disappointment and disengagement. Project managers may engage in the following activities when developing these descriptions:

- Collaborate with consumer-run organizations and other community partners engaged in similar activities for advice and sample forms
- Share task descriptions during all recruitment-based activities
- Share task descriptions with other partners and stakeholders
- Modify task descriptions when needed to assure that they accurately reflect informal modifications of the original description

11 Create mentorship opportunities.

Mentorship relationships create wonderful opportunities for professional and personal growth. These types of relationships should be encouraged because they inherently increase the comfort level and confidence of those who are unfamiliar with the process. These relationships also reduce the sense of isolation and "differentness" that newcomers frequently feel but have difficulty articulating in a group setting. Strategies should be developed that promote the development of relationships among stakeholders.

12 Avoid tokenism and embrace diversity.

Tokenism—identifying a single person to represent the voice of an entire group of people or being one of the few veterans who have consciously chosen to publicly disclose their status—frequently results in feelings of disconnectedness and isolation from other stakeholders at the table. It also deprives the process of the rich diversity that exists within communities and puts an inordinate amount of pressure on the one to speak for all veterans. Consequently, project managers are encouraged to widen the net and to identify and recruit consumers in numbers that enhance the quality of experiences and viewpoints that are given voice at the table.

Agencies and organizations are encouraged to establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with networks and organizations led by veterans. Then when opportunities for involvement arise, they have partners to help them identify individuals who are interested in the subject matter and in joining the activity.

There is also a need to think outside the box when attempting to recruit individuals from communities or populations that may not be found in the traditional recruitment places. Potential areas for recruitment are churches, civic organizations, and other community-based organizations that may not be mental health care providers, but nevertheless will provide assistance in identifying and recruiting diverse partners.

13 Compensate and recognize contributions.

In many instances veteran participants are not compensated for their participation in these activities. Compensation includes, but is not limited to, being paid by an employer or some other entity to participate because the activities are within the scope of employment or other paid activity. This leaves out both individuals who work for employers who elect not to pay them for participating in these activities and individuals who are not employed. Once again, these differences may impact upon an individual's ability to participate or upon the length of time he or she is able to commit to this activity. Since many of these statewide initiatives are long term, it is important to consider ways to enhance the ability of consumers to sustain their involvement. Providing a stipend based on flat or hourly rates is one suggestion, while providing honoraria is another. Peer-operated services have successfully partnered with state agencies in developing compensation policies and practices that fairly compensate individuals for their contributions.

Similarly, peers have indicated that where they are essentially functioning as volunteers recognition of their contributions is important to them. Recognition may come in the way of publicly thanking them for their work or providing certificates or other types of written acknowledgement upon the completion of their tasks.

Conclusion

In a real sense, project managers, often by default, must assume responsibility for initiating and sustaining efforts to level the playing field. However, this responsibility complements the overall goals of jail diversion and prison reentry programs. Involvement in these activities sometimes represents the first opportunities that many individuals with histories of incarceration have to use their experiences to help others and to inform the systems that impact so greatly on their lives, their families, and the communities they return to. On a broader level, work done in these areas is intimately related to gaining a clear insight into what policy changes are needed to promote leadership and workforce development strategies for individuals with histories of incarceration. The vestiges of incarceration have a profound impact upon a veteran's ability to view him or herself as a valued citizen partner. Moreover, identifying, eliminating, or at the very least mitigating the impact of policies having a disparate impact on veterans, as well as those that directly restrict their access and eligibility to perform many of the essential functions of reentry and diversion programs, are important roles for program staff. The modification of restrictions and reducing the financial hardship caused by facially neutral fiscal policies will result in a larger and more diverse pool of consumer partners. Jail diversion and prison reentry programs have a responsibility to proactively address these systems challenges. Individuals with histories of incarceration are uniquely positioned to inform, support, and lead efforts to reform the criminal justice and mental health systems; the action steps described above are a *call to action*.

Reference

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