Needs Assessment for Persons with Severe Mental Illness: What Services Are Needed for Successful Community Living?

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ABSTRACT: The development and implementation of effective community support systems are goals of many public mental health authorities who are attempting to shift the focus and dollars for mental health services from inpatient to community care. This article presents the results of a survey which asked 90 community mental health agency case managers to assess the community support and residential needs of over 1400 of their clients. Medication monitoring and therapy were rated high priority needs. Psychosocial treatment, day and vocational activities also ranked high. Survey responses regarding residential services indicated a need for more supported and supervised options.

INTRODUCTION

In the past three decades, the public mental health system nationally has experienced a decrease in the utilization of state mental hospitals and a concomitant shift to the community of responsibility to provide...
services to persons with severe and chronic mental illness (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1985). Like most of the nation, Hamilton County, Ohio, has experienced a gradual decrease in state psychiatric hospital beds. The transition of many long-term state hospital residents into the community and the shorter lengths of stay for more recent admissions have increased demands both on existing housing resources and for new services to accommodate community clients with more intensive needs. Unlike many areas, Hamilton County has had state support, bolstered by funds from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, for its efforts to identify the needs of persons with severe mental illness and to develop community services to address them.

In terms of its state mental health system, Ohio has been considered one of the leaders in the national effort to shift resources and services for persons with serious mental illness from inpatient to community settings. Torrey's 1990 rating of state programs for the seriously mentally ill ranked Ohio fourth overall in terms of services and first for states with over 6 million residents (Torrey, Wolfe, & Flynn, 1990). During the decade of the 1980s, the Ohio Department of Mental Health provided strong leadership to county mental health boards to adopt and operationalize the concept of a community support system (CSS) and encouraged implementation of the CSS model throughout the state. The basis of the CSS model is the establishment of an array of services including outreach, housing, emergency/crisis response, medication, vocational, and other services to meet the needs of individual clients. Case management serves as the focal point of service provision, helping to ensure that clients receive the services they need by providing coordination of and linkage to services, and assessing the continuing appropriateness of services as the needs of the clients change (Stroul, 1988).

The strong commitment by the state to the CSS model in general and case management in particular has been reflected in the Ohio Department of Mental Health's efforts to secure a strong funding base, mandate the development of the necessary components for case management to work, and support programs to increase the human resource capacity to deliver needed services to the mentally ill (Knisley, 1987). A case management system funded and administered through the Hamilton County Mental Health Board has been in operation since 1986. Since that time, services have expanded from approximately 1800 clients served by 45 case managers in 6 agencies to approximately 3500 clients served by 93 case managers in 8 agencies.