

A CEO's Comments on Implementing WRAP

Several months ago, at the annual IAPSRs conference, I was sitting in a workshop led by a well known national consumer leader. He discussed the effects the mental health system has on people's lives by limiting or taking away their choice, strategies that focus on surveillance, compliance, coercion, and too often forced treatment. He questioned how we could help those who experience psychiatric symptoms assume responsibility for their lives when our mental health system takes away their power. Having worked as a provider in the mental health system for thirty years, what he said rang true. Then I thought about the programs and services my organization provides. I was struck with the realization that I was that mental health system he was talking about. Oh no! In that moment I experienced a crisis of consciousness that continued for the next several months. Yes, I had worked to incorporate consumer-centered values in our programs, but I realized we had really only touched the edges. I needed to find a way to get to the core, to actually change what we did on a daily basis.

In my search for a way to begin, I discovered Mary Ellen Copeland, the creator of the Wellness Recovery Action Plan. In a three hour workshop in Phoenix, Mary Ellen presented the WRAP. I found it to be an exciting new recovery tool and could see that it would be very effective for people who experience psychiatric symptoms. Mary Ellen identified five principles of recovery; hope, personal responsibility, education, self-advocacy, and support. Built on these five principles, WRAP provides a self-help framework for people who experience psychiatric symptoms. It is simple but powerful. It provides a way for people to take control of their life, moving beyond the consequences of their mental illness and the effects of stigma and discrimination.

Applying these principles seemed like a good

place to start. So, accompanied by several of my managers I went to Vermont for the "train the trainer" week with Mary Ellen Copeland and her team. About 20 people from California to Maine participated. The group was both consumers and professionals who will join about 200 others across the country to teach the WRAP program. As the week progressed and people shared their personal stories I saw first hand that recovery is happening. People are getting their lives back. They are gaining self-esteem. They are sticking up for their rights. They are helping themselves and helping each other. They have hope. And so do I.

As the week with Mary Ellen progressed, my excitement grew. I wanted to come back and start the work right away. But, the more I pondered how to begin, the more I realized that a new context was needed in my agency and community in order for recovery to take root and grow. The task seemed overwhelming. There was no evidence that the 700 case managers and the dozens of provider agencies who work with the 14,000 consumers in our community had heard the news about recovery. Our system and the rules that govern it does not allow room for recovery. How would we get paid to teach wellness instead of treating illness?

Mary Ellen's words of reassurance gave me encouragement, "the journey has already begun; consumers are recovering and we won't go back because too many of us have already been empowered." Well, why not! If the system can't change from the top down, it can be transformed from the bottom up. The consumers themselves are creating the solution. And this is indeed what WRAP is all about, personal responsibility and self-advocacy. The task felt easier. Join with the consumers and support their journey.

When our friend in the academic recovery community, Leroy Spaniol at Boston

University talks about recovery he says, “People are seen as having solutions rather than problems. People may lack the knowledge, skills, and supports to have effective solutions.” Thinking about that gave me further direction. Create ways for consumers to get the knowledge, to practice new skills, and to support each other.

So, WRAP in the context of a recovery environment that provides opportunities for knowledge, skills development, and peer support will be a catalyst for a profound paradigm shift. If you are considering using WRAP expect some hard work. Be prepared for a transformation. Change is always challenging, but I sense that we are all ready for this one. Here is what I intend to do to participate.

1. Teach hope and create hope in every experience. From the first contact, tell consumers and families about hope. Make opportunities for consumers around us to share their recovery story to demonstrate that hope is real.
2. Listen carefully to consumers. They will tell us what they need to be successful. Make sure consumers are present in all we do, not as tokens but as teachers, as advocates, as participants in our planning, service delivery, and quality improvement efforts. This will be a demonstration of empowerment.
3. Realign our mission to one of recovery rather than treatment. Our mission statement must affirm the values of recovering: empowerment; personal choice; community integration; focus on strengths; and connection to others, the environment, and to meaning and purpose.
4. Begin to educate. I have started with becoming educated myself. In the past several months I have spent time with consumer educators and reformers like Mary Ellen Copeland, Pat Deegan, Leroy Spaniol, Dan Fischer, Ed Knight. Now I

can begin reshaping our training program. I can create a Recovery Center that will be a resource for recovery information for my agency and the community. Consumers, professionals, and family members can attend the Recovery Center participating together in classes and workshops learning the WRAP and how to recover.

5. Critically examine our services, with feedback from our users, to discover how to align our practice with the principles of recovery.
6. Be an advocate to reform government policies, rules, and funding requirements that limit and restrict recovery.

By building a context for the transformation to unfold, I believe WRAP will have its fullest impact and recovery will grow.

Finally, two comments of caution. Be sure your recovery educators are properly trained in the WRAP program. Just taking the Copeland red book and telling consumers to do a WRAP plan will not be effective. Training is available.

Second, WRAP must be developed and owned by the consumer. Each WRAP is as unique as the individual who develops it. It is a self-help tool. So, as planners and administrators, even though we may be enthusiastic and have good intentions, we should be careful not to make this tool a requirement. In our planning, we should be guided by the principles on which WRAP is built; the human right that each individual be given opportunities to take responsibility for their life and choose their journey.

Eugene Johnson, CEO
META Services, Inc.
8/3/00

For further information on WRAP and Mary Ellen’s work and teachings see www.mentalhealthrecovery.com.