

Helpful Support Services for Persons with a Mental Disorder

Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas

The program at our May 25 meeting addressed the support services that are available to mental health clients in the East Bay. Common to all three sets of speakers is their dedication to treating clients as responsible adults and relying on them to set the tone and direction for the help they receive.

Johanna Kocher and **Frances Wage** are both placement counselors for the Bay Area Homes Network, which operates housing for the neurobiologically disabled, mentally ill, mentally handicapped, and head trauma victims in Contra Costa County.

“We got started in January of '91, when we took over a badly run board-and-care facility in Concord,” Wage says. “After we got it cleaned up and got the alcohol out, we discovered that the clients themselves were teaching us what they needed. We consider ourselves ‘client trained.’”

“We quickly saw that there’s not a lot of safe housing out there. So we got our families and friends involved in setting up our own homes.”

The Bay Area Homes Network now runs a series of board-and-care homes, room-and-board homes, and share apartments in Concord, Pittsburg, Antioch, Walnut Creek, Lafayette, and soon in Tahoe. Some of these facilities are co-ed, but most are not. Network counselors personally see every client and try to place him or her in housing that will suit his or her needs and personality.

“Our philosophy is that the client is the best judge of his or her own needs and the most important influence on his or her personal growth,” Wage says. “We believe in self-reliance, self-respect, dignity, a good attitude, and no drugs or alcohol.”

The Bay Area Homes Network is a nonprofit organization with a board of directors that includes seven of its clients’ family members. While privately funded by the individual owner/managers, the network gladly accepts donations of time and money, as well as furniture, silverware and dishes, small used cars—“anything you’d need to set up an apartment,” Kocher says.

The owner/managers encourage the client to maintain an open and honest relationship with his or her doctor or therapist and will work with the client’s mental health professional in times of crisis.

The network has future plans for clients to obtain lease-option condos with a personalized payment schedule. It also wants to build a membership club where clients can “hang out” and socialize with ping-pong and other games.

Jim McClure and **Karen Jaeckel** are directors of Reach-Out of Alameda County, a client-run hospital visitation program of the Alameda County Network of Mental Health Clients. Reach-Out visitors—who are all clients themselves—

give patients emotional support, supplies, and the sense that they too can make it in the community.

“We got started in 1982 by a woman, Gladys Robinson, who was in the hospital and got so depressed that, when she got out, she decided that she didn’t want this to happen to others,” says McClure.

Reach-Out rotates its services among five East Bay hospitals, visiting one each Saturday. Because its members are all clients of mental health services, they are experts concerning hospital routines and administration, substance abuse, and board-and-care situations.

“We talk to people, give them reassurance, let them know they are not alone, and bring them hope,” Jaeckel says. “We are advocates in the original sense of the word—‘calling to’ them.”

Reach-Out works with hospital staff, such as occupational therapists, to select which clients they will see. The relationship they build with a client and the services they offer of course depend on the duration of the client’s hospital stay.

The organization receives funding from the San Francisco Study Foundation and the Zellerbach Family Fund but also accepts private donations.

Paul Clermont is a director of Mental Health Options in Berkeley, a client-run, self-help organization which conducts problem-solving training workshops.

“We run discussion groups, support groups, and training for people who are having trouble getting the services they need,” Clermont says.

His office is open from 9:45 a.m. to 2:45 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays. In the context of either a group setting or peer counseling, he helps clients solve problems with the following format:

1. Define the problem.
2. Collect relevant information, usually from the client him- or herself.
3. Generate options or possible solutions. “This is a brainstorming session,” Clermont says, “where we write everything down on flip charts.”
4. Evaluate the options. “We ask the client ‘Which of these do you like?’ ‘Which do you dislike, and why?’ If there’s time, we write down the pros and cons of each option.”
5. Select one or more options that appeal to the person and develop a step-by-step plan to reach a satisfactory solution.
6. Try out the option and report on the outcome. “If things don’t work out,” Clermont says, “we try other options from the list.”

People who fit into this program, he says, tend to be higher functioning with good verbal skills. “A sample problem we solved recently was a young man of about 20 who was living with his parents in an unsatisfactory relationship. They were verbally abusive and critical. We developed the option of his trying a halfway house, and he’s living there now.”

Mental Health Options has no residency requirement and is open to clients in Alameda and Contra Costa counties.