As Ohio continues to focus on local efforts to establish and enhance Recovery-Oriented Systems of Care, it’s important to continually and regularly discuss the importance of the advocacy voices found within the recovery community. Individuals and families who have been impacted by mental illness or addiction understand the intricate details of helping someone who is experiencing a mental illness or a substance use disorder. It is directly because of this understanding and lived experience that individuals in recovery and their family members are relied upon to stand up and share their knowledge as we continue our collective efforts to help individuals and families in need throughout Ohio.

The following steps were presented by William White in a blog post entitled, “A Movement of One, A Movement of Millions.” While the blog spoke more specifically to addiction recovery, many of the action steps outlined below are equally applicable to mental illness recovery. For the purposes of this document, mental health components have been incorporated into the following suggestions for how you can support the larger cultural and political mobilization of individuals in recovery and their allies.

**Confront your own Shame** (internalized stigma). Social action begins with a change in personal consciousness. You can elevate that consciousness by exploring your own feelings about addiction and/or mental illness and recovery. Do you avoid opportunities to share your recovery status or how addiction and/or mental illness and recovery have affected your family? Do you find the subject embarrassing? For those who work in addiction or mental health treatment, do you find yourself masking your profession in new social situations? How do you react to people’s responses to the disclosure of what you do? Confronting addiction/mental illness/recovery-related social stigma begins with confronting the stigma we have absorbed into our own being.

**Break the Silence at Home** (within your family and social circle). Moving from shame to self-acceptance requires breaking silence about stigmatized issues. The first (and often hardest) area within which to break silence is to one’s own family and social network. Many recovery advocates can stand in front of a state capital and speak to hundreds or thousands of people about their addiction or mental illness and their recovery but have not shared even the briefest version of that story with their grandparents, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, and their friends. Recovery advocacy begins at home.

“I’m my mission to share this with the world and to let them know that there is life on the other side of those dark times that seem so hopeless and helpless. I want to show the world that there is life - surprising, wonderful, and unexpected life after diagnosis.”

~ Demi Lovato

**Educate Yourself** (about recovery pathways different than your own). You are not the universe is a needed foundational premise. Learn about pathways and styles of recovery different than your own. Practice humility and tolerance as you encounter others who have experienced alternative ways of healing. “There are many pathways to recovery and all are cause for celebration” is a central mantra of the new recovery advocacy movement. As an advocate, you are not seeking to impose or promote your particular recovery pathway or style of recovery on others. Your task is to validate and celebrate the growing varieties of recovery experience.

**Find Kindred Spirits and Organize.** Advocacy related to any stigmatized status or condition can be as distressing and exhausting as it is exhilarating. Advocacy is an activity best done through a community of shared experience and commitment. Reach out to others who share your interest and forge an advocacy community—no matter how small the original circle.

**Contribute Time, Skills, and Money.** Recovery brings assets that can be returned to others as an act of amends and gratitude. Those assets can be reinvested in widening the doorways of recovery for others on a personal and even social policy level. Invest your time and talents and invest a portion of the financial resources flowing from your recovery to support organizations that make recovery possible for others.
Formulate Your Public Story (about the transformative power of recovery). One’s public recovery story presented in the context of recovery advocacy should be different in content and style from that shared with trusted friends or within the rooms of recovery mutual aid fellowships. The latter often focuses on the details of the addiction and recovery experience where the former focuses on one’s recovery status and the transformative power and fruits of recovery experienced by individuals, families, and communities. Such distinctions, their rationale, and the importance of language and protecting boundaries of privacy can be acquired through the messaging training provided by recovery advocacy organizations.

Offer Public Witness. Recovery stories, when publicly disclosed, provide a form of living proof more powerful than research studies or expert testimony. Such shared stories affirm that individuals and families can and do survive addiction and mental illness, achieve enhanced global health and functioning, live meaningful lives, and make significant contributions within their communities and the larger society. Of everything you do as an advocate, nothing will be more powerful than sharing your own story and modeling a life lived fully and deeply.

Intersection of Advocacy and Stigma

In *Ending Discrimination Against People with Mental and Substance Use Disorders: The Evidence for Stigma Change*, the authors reported that “Improving the lives of people with mental and substance use disorders has been a priority in the United States for more than 50 years. Over the same 50 year period, positive changes in American public attitudes and beliefs about mental and substance use disorders has lagged.” The authors also demonstrate that stigma is not a problem that affects only a few.

- Most estimates agree that roughly 1 in 4 or 1 in 5 Americans will experience a mental health problem or will misuse alcohol or drugs during their lifetime.
- In 2014, nearly 44 million Americans aged 12 and older experienced a mental health problem, and for almost 10 million adults, this was a serious mental illness that met standards diagnostic criteria.
- In 2013, 17 million adults said that they were misusing or dependent on alcohol, and 24 million people over the age of 12 said that they had used illicit drugs during the prior month.
- Of the 28 million Americans in 2013 who needed treatment for a problem related to alcohol and drugs, fewer than 1 in 10 received any treatment.

The authors found that:

“Stigma has a dynamic multidimensional, multilevel phenomenon that occurs at three levels of society – structural (laws, regulations, policies) public (attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of individuals and groups), and self-stigma (internalized negative stereotypes). A hallmark of stigma, like stereotyping, is that it overgeneralizes. People who have mental or substance use disorders do not form a discrete, static, or homogenous group. These disorders can vary among individuals and across a person’s lifespan by factors including symptom type and severity. For example, a substance use disorder may be characterized by misuse or chemical dependency, and mental illness may be experienced by an individual as an acute, intermittent, or chronic illness.”

Advocacy continues to be one of the most effective strategies to combat the effects of stigma. Education, advocacy, and person-to-person interactions on the topics of mental health and addiction recovery by people with and without mental and substance use disorders will continue to be a key component of ending the stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness and addiction.

**Statewide Advocacy Network**

With support from the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, the Statewide Advocacy Network (SWAN) is working to support advocacy efforts and empowerment activities within Ohio’s communities of recovery. SWAN partners are actively engaging community members throughout Ohio to continue to promote recovery principles and encourage support.