For the past three years, Ohio’s Alcohol, Drug Addiction, and Mental Health Boards have been implementing the Recovery IS Beautiful BluePrint across the state. Through the implementation of this BluePrint, local Boards are working to fully move Ohio’s community mental health and addiction system to a Recovery-Oriented System of Care (ROSC) that promotes good health through prevention and wellness programs while providing crisis intervention, treatment, and recovery support services to individuals and families experiencing a mental health and/or substance abuse problem.

The first principle of the Recovery IS Beautiful BluePrint is “Focusing on Clients and Families”. This principle recognizes that healthcare is personal and most effective when delivered based upon the needs and values of the individual receiving care. The goal for achieving this principle states that we must, “fully involve clients and families in orienting Ohio toward a Recovery-Oriented System of Care encompassing mental health and addiction prevention, treatment, and recovery supports”. Recovery IS Beautiful recognizes that a true Recovery-Oriented System of Care not only allows, but encourages, individuals and families to drive the services they receive and the entire system of care toward meeting the unique, cultural, age, and gender specific needs of individuals, families, and communities.

As Ohio becomes one of the leaders in serving individuals and families within Recovery-Oriented Systems of Care, more than ever we must all ensure that there is a partnership between the system of care and individuals in recovery and their family members. This will only be accomplished with a strong, empowered, and active recovery voice at all levels of decision-making.

The recovery community across Ohio is an extremely diverse group of individuals and organizations that recognize that there are multiple pathways to achieving recovery, and that one of the strongest elements supporting individuals in recovery, are other individuals in recovery. Peers supporting peers has been tested through time and has proven to be one of the most effective and cost-efficient strategies in helping individuals with either a mental illness or addiction initiate and sustain a recovery program.

So how do we ensure that Ohio has a strong, active, and vibrant recovery voice?

- **First**, we must commit to empowering a strong recovery voice across Ohio;
- **Second**, we must promote the development of recovery support services, and help local individuals in recovery build strong and meaningful recovery organizations;
- **Third**, we must ensure meaningful and active representation and participation on all local Alcohol, Drug Addiction, and Mental Health Boards, and on all governing boards of prevention, treatment, and recovery support agencies;
- **Fourth**, we must reduce stigma by educating all Ohioans about what mental illness and addiction are and are not, and by developing a better understanding of the multiple pathways to recovery; and
- **Fifth**, we must *Celebrate* Recovery at all steps along the way!
To empower a strong recovery voice one of the most important activities a community can undertake, is to ensure that the local system of care has strong and active recovery supports woven throughout the system, including peer supports and Peer Run Organizations for both individuals in recovery from addiction and/or mental illness. These organizations can be comprehensive and include both individuals in recovery from mental illness and addiction, or they may be a more singularly focused organization. A Peer Run Organization is an independent entity, that is run and governed by individuals in recovery. A Peer Run Organization is designed to meet the needs of their community members in recovery by assisting and supporting individuals in their recovery efforts. This may include classes on life skills, parenting classes, social services, health care and housing support services, social engagements, and peer supports.

According to the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (OhioMHAS), “Peer Support is a process of giving support and education from individuals with a shared life experience. Through the promotion of sharing personal experience and knowledge, individuals engaged in peer support play an active and vital role in laying the foundation for sustained recovery…” One of the tenets of recovery is “giving back”, and we know that by helping others by providing peer support, individuals in recovery are strengthening their own recovery at the same time, creating a win-win opportunity.

Peer Run Organizations put a public face on recovery and can go a long way in helping the community understand and accept individuals in recovery. The staff, board members, and participants of Peer Run Organizations can help to educate the community on the realities of mental illness and addiction while showing community members that recovery is possible and that individuals in recovery can and do become active and vital members of their local communities. Through this education and through interaction with the public, members of Peer Run Organizations are uniquely positioned to help reduce the stigma associated with mental illness and addiction.

Supporting and empowering a strong recovery voice and strong recovery community is not only the right thing to do; it is the smart thing to do. The evidence supports the fact that individuals involved with peers will have a stronger and more sustained recovery, peers are more accessible, and most often less costly.

To help facilitate this process across Ohio, the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services has supported the development of the Statewide Advocacy Network (SWAN), inclusive of both statewide and regional grants designed to help support and strengthen Peer Run Organizations (PRO) in Ohio. The goal is to build upon the existing network of PROs, and existing tools, and to strengthen the leadership capabilities and further empower Ohio’s recovery voice, while also working to increase access to PROs throughout the state. Knowing the positive impact that peers, peer supporters, and Peer Run Organizations have on recovery, what a wonderful thing it would be if we had peer supporters and Peer Run Organizations supported and empowered in every community in Ohio.

Sources:
Ohio Department of Mental Health & Addiction Services
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
William White

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