

Excerpt from Chapter 5, On Our Own, Together

St. Louis Empowerment Center

by Helen Minth

The Empowerment Center's philosophy is that there is no "right way" to use a peer-run drop-in center. Some consumers want companionship and the opportunity to enjoy a cup of coffee or to participate in group recreation. Still others use on-site resource materials to locate food pantries or housing. Some people use the computer equipment to develop a resume, write a letter, or learn a new software application. Some attend every day, and others come by when they are bored, lonely, or in crisis or when they have worn out their welcome at another program. Learning and growth occur because people choose to participate in activities that foster learning and personal growth. People move on because they are ready and they want to—not because their benefits are exhausted.

The Empowerment Center has become a daytime safe haven for many people with mental illness who are homeless. The center offers them a place to do their laundry or take a shower, and a place where they can meet and get help from other consumers and professionals, using the model of integrated service delivery.

We do not have case managers at the center because we do not keep "official" records on our participants. Our grants require us to keep a daily list of participants and the hours they are here. We also keep logs of meeting attendance and calls to the Friendship Line, a telephone line for peer support, staffed by program assistants from the center. Participants are not required to sign in under their legal names, so Queen Elizabeth and Elvis are regular visitors.

...

All employees are required to be consumers of mental health services and all are trained in their job positions, including part-time receptionists, cleaners, and peer counselors. Many part-time employees use these entry-level positions as springboards to other employment. Our full-time employees have diverse degrees from a master's degree in social work to a degree in pastoral care, although a college degree is not a necessity for employment. All employees are judged on their creativity, willingness to learn, and ability to relate to others.

Our staffing patterns are similar to the shifts at a hospital. We have openers at 7:00 a.m. and closers at 6:00 p.m. Salaried staff works 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., 12:00 noon to 8:00 p.m., 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. or 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., depending on their own needs.