



## **Peer Support Services in Iowa**

A trend has emerged in the delivery and funding of mental health services during the last decade toward increased consumer involvement in treatment planning and decision-making. The 2003 President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health emphasized the philosophy of recovery, a person-centered approach to illness management focused on education, personal responsibility, self-advocacy, and empowerment. Several strategies to manage illness embrace the recovery philosophy, including peer support. Peer support is very generally described as supports and services provided by individuals who have experienced serious mental illness to others who also have mental illness. Peer support will soon be recognized by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) as an evidence-based practice in the delivery of mental health services.

In Iowa, peer support is gaining momentum as an emerging best practice in assisting individuals to meet the goals established in their treatment plans. Peer support, although not available everywhere in the state, is an effective mode of service delivery and support. The first peer support programs in Iowa were established through a partnership with Magellan Health Services, Iowa's behavioral health care management contractor. Using community reinvestment dollars, Magellan provided funding for several community mental health centers to evaluate the effectiveness and cost of peer support services in Iowa. Peer support is now a reimbursable service through Medicaid, and community mental health centers are able to renegotiate their current contracts with Magellan to include community support services or peer support services led by mental health peers. Currently, 11 of the 44 community mental health centers in Iowa have or are in the process of gaining peer support programs through grants or direct reimbursement.

The Iowa Department of Human Services has prioritized peer support as part of the mental health delivery system in Iowa by targeting Mental Health Block Grant dollars for four more years to create a network of peer support specialists throughout the state. The goal of this network, called the Iowa Peer Support Training Academy (IPSTA), is to create an infrastructure in Iowa that provides peer support, and to work with providers and consumers to embrace a philosophy of consumer involvement. The foundation of this infrastructure is built on the principle that consumers can direct their own recovery.

Outlooks, Inc. works with the Iowa Department of Human Services to direct the IPSTA. Outlooks began by establishing a Peer Support Consumer Advisory Committee to provide guidance from people with serious mental illness throughout the development of this program. Iowa's training program utilizes the expertise of local consumers as well as the nationally recognized Georgia model to facilitate the peer support training program and certification process. Experts from Georgia's program provide the actual training and administer the exam. The IPSTA offers continuing education for graduates on topics such as documentation and advocacy, and Academy graduates are in the process of developing a universal job description and code of ethics for peer support specialists in Iowa.

The IPSTA trained and certified 29 peer support specialists in 2006, 31 peer support specialists in 2007, and 14 peer support specialists in 2008. For more information about the Academy, go to <http://www.sppg.com/home/peersupport.php>.