

Marvin Southard Video Transcript

A Recovery Oriented Agency

Hi! My name is Marvin Southard and I'm a social worker who is the director of the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health. I'm here today to introduce a training video on the inclusion of recovery in social work curricula. I thought I'd begin by describing that "ah-ha" moment that taught me that recovery was a goal for all clients suffering from mental illness and not just for some.

In the 80's I was the clinical director of a mental health agency in East Los Angeles and we started a vocational training program to get jobs for our mental health clients. And there were two clients who applied to participate in the program that I had some doubts about; one was an individual suffering from schizophrenia and the other was a person with a rather severe case of obsessive compulsive disorder. And both of them had been in treatment for a long time and I wasn't sure they could make good use of this job program. But I decided to let them have a chance and see what happened. And what I learned was that two months of having a job, of having a place in society, of feeling included and participating did more for their lives and for the reduction of their symptoms than years of medication and psychotherapy.

So I became a convert and I came to believe that looking at recovery was the goal of all mental health treatment. That we oughtn't to be focusing primarily on the control of symptoms, but rather on focusing on those things that every human being wants from their life. Everybody wants a safe place to live, a meaningful way of using their time, close personal relationships with other human beings, and above all a sense that their life means something as they give back to their communities. And to me that's what recovery entails.

When I became the director here in Los Angeles I was determined that we would have a recovery-oriented mental health system. But anything big isn't necessarily easy. And so as we began to implement that program, one of the first steps we did is to hire persons with lived experience of mental illness into our system. But as we did so we uncovered a certain hidden stigma against persons with mental illness even among our social workers and our mental health clinicians. And this wasn't a stigma in that they looked down necessarily on people with mental illness, but rather that they didn't expect these people in the end to have very much of a life.

So hiring people with lived experience of mental illness came to be that turning point in our system because we were able to show our mental health teams that clients brought them a gift. And that gift was the possibility of engagement of other clients with mental illness in such a way that they could be a very major part of the treatment teams that led other people into recovery. And that process has been what we have been working on for this last 10 years in Los Angeles, step by step trying to build the role of persons with lived experience throughout our system. And that means every part of our system, including the decision making.

We have created here in Los Angeles something we call the Systems Leadership Team that makes all of the big decisions. It includes people from other systems in Los Angeles County including law

enforcement, hospitals, community agencies, and that group helps us make all our key decisions. And what's important is we learned we make the best decisions in that Systems Leadership Team when we listen to the client voice. When we put the client voice at the center of our decision making, we find out that we make decisions that make a better system and make recovery a possibility for greater numbers of human beings.

So as we've developed the recovery model in Los Angeles we have learned that the recovery model creates not just better outcomes for people with mental illness and their families, it also creates a work experience that is better for social workers and other clinicians. So as you move forward in this training program I hope you learn that recovery is a tool that can help all of us lead better lives. Thank you.