

Wellness Self-Management: Supporting Recovery in NYS Prisons

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The Wellness Self Management (WSM) program was developed in 2006 by the New York State Office of Mental Health in partnership with the Urban Institute for Behavioral Health (UIBH), a consortium of agencies in New York City committed to promoting evidence-based practices. WSM is based on Illness Management and Recovery, one of the nationally recognized evidence-based practices for adults with serious mental health problems.

WSM is a curriculum-based clinical practice that provides information, knowledge and skills to help people make decisions that support recovery. The curriculum has been organized into a 57 lesson personal workbook that covers many different topics addressing recovery, including practical facts about mental health problems and treatment; coping and stress management; mental health wellness, relapse prevention, and the connection between physical and mental health problems. The format of each lesson includes important information followed by discussion points, a personalized worksheet and finally an opportunity to plan and implement an action step.

In 2007, the New York State Office of Mental Health initiated an effort to assist agencies across the state to implement, sustain, and spread WSM programs throughout their organizations. Currently, over 100 mental health agencies representing the full spectrum of program types have joined this effort and are currently providing WSM group programs for over 2,500 adults. Implementing a new practice presents numerous challenges for organizations and this is especially true for mental health services in prison settings. However, the commitment and support of leadership along with an enthusiastic staff addressed these challenges and successfully implemented and spread the WSM program in forensic settings.

WSM groups have been offered in NYS prisons since May 2008, when it began in eight prison sites and in the Treatment Mall for inpatients at the Central New York Psychiatric Center. It expanded to two more prison sites beginning in January 2009. Over 100 incarcerated patients have completed the WSM curriculum, and an additional 120 participants are currently enrolled and expected to complete the program in 2009.

People with mental illness living in community settings may face numerous obstacles to recovery, but it is much more challenging to people in a prison environment. OMH staff are working with patients within the prison system and creatively engage the patients, who in turn are making a commitment to their own personal recovery. The patients attend group regularly and thoughtfully utilize the WSM workbook. Most importantly, participants begin to experience hope.

Group facilitators have observed increased insights and confidence, improved coping skills and fewer disciplinary difficulties among program participants. Group members have reported a sense of unity and respect amongst themselves, and an appreciation of the program's positive focus. One participant stated, "It gives you a positive outlook. You can set goals and prepare for the outside." A fellow group member responded, "It helps to put sense into your mind."

Because of positive feedback from practitioners and participants, there is now an interest in adapting the WSM curriculum to address the unique issues faced by individuals in prison environments and a work team is being created to design a prison-specific version of the program. We look forward to this exciting initiative and anticipate implementing this version by the fall of 2009. We expect that this process will continue to improve the quality of services to individuals in New York prisons and contribute to the field of forensic-focused mental health services.