



A Clubhouse Opens Doors and Opportunities for the Mentally Ill in Webster City, Iowa

Faith in Action: Replication of the Interfaith Volunteer Caregivers Program

SUMMARY

The Mental Health Association in Hamilton County, Iowa, established a Compeer program, a nationwide program matching volunteers with people with mental illness or mental disabilities.

The project was part of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) *Interfaith Volunteer Caregivers Program*, *Faith in Action*®, *Generation 2* and *Generation 3* national program.

Key Results

- Staff recruited 11 volunteers, including:
 - Four one-on-one volunteers who spent at least an hour a week with their matched friend.
 - Five group volunteers who assisted consumers at the Compeer Clubhouse (see below).
 - One telephone volunteer who called their matched friend weekly.
 - One pen pal volunteer who sent their matched friend cards for special occasions.
- Staff opened the Compeer Clubhouse in an old fire station near Webster City.

Funding

RWJF supported this project with a grant of \$25,000 from June 1996 to January 1998.

THE PROBLEM

The project was based in the small community of Webster City, Iowa where an 80-year-old county facility for people with mental illness had closed and its residents had to move into their own apartments. Where they once ate meals with 40 other people, they now ate

alone. While the county home had planned activities for them, they no longer had a place to go for those events.

Mental health staff started seeing an increase in depression, hospitalization, and the need for medications among the former residents. Hamilton County Mental Health Services applied for a *Faith in Action* grant to assist in funding a Compeer program, a national program that matches people with mental illness with friends who will spend time with them

THE PROJECT

The project got off to a slow start with personnel difficulties ending in the termination of the first director. The new executive had about four months to establish the program before the *Faith in Action* grant ended.

During that time, the project reorganized the Compeer Board of Advisors, which oversaw the program, by adding five new members who were "consumers," that is, people with a mental illness or mental disability.

The project expanded its options for volunteers from simply one-on-one volunteering to include group, telephone, and pen pal volunteers. Because people with mental illness no longer had a place to gather, the project opened a gathering place, called the Compeer Clubhouse, in town at a former fire station. The director recruited volunteers through churches, civic organizations, and word of mouth from other volunteers.

A three-hour training for volunteers emphasized to the volunteers that their role was one of friend, not therapist or doctor, to the person with whom they were matched. The volunteers were there to be a support and encourage people to be their own advocate and seek help on their own.

During the training, volunteers also learned more about mental illnesses, how to recognize side effects from medications and possible suicidal behavior, as well as setting boundaries for people who may be very eager to spend time with them.

Volunteers could talk to the person's case manager if they noticed certain behaviors or side effects from medications. The project also held two additional trainings each year for volunteers.

A volunteer recognition breakfast was begun, which gave each volunteer a gift certificate to a new tearoom in Webster City so that they could take their friend out to eat. Each volunteer also received an award recognizing their service and a potted plant to take home.

RESULTS

- **Recruited four one-on-one volunteers, five group volunteers, one telephone volunteer, and one pen pal volunteer.** The one-on-one volunteers spent at least an hour a week with their matched friend. The activities depended on the interest of the volunteers and their friends and included going bowling, getting something to eat, shopping, going on short trips, and simply getting together and talking.

Group volunteers came to the Compeer Clubhouse (see next bullet) to visit with the consumers, and assist them to learn how to prepare their own meals, help people write letters to their families, and play games with them. The telephone volunteer called their friend once a week to check in and see how they were doing. The pen pal volunteer sent their friends cards on their birthdays and for holidays.

Many people with mental illnesses receive no recognition of their birthdays from family members.

- **Opened the Compeer Clubhouse in an old fire station near downtown Webster City.** The clubhouse was open Monday through Thursday from 10am to 2pm. On Tuesdays, the clubhouse was also open from 5pm to 8pm for a movie or other activities.

Having the clubhouse provided a place for people who live alone to gather and share in activities such as playing pool, cooking, watching TV, using computers, exercising, and making crafts.

It was hoped that as people with special needs become more skilled in such areas as using a computer, they would become more confident of their abilities and able to advocate for themselves. In the four months it was open during the *Faith in Action* grant, the clubhouse averaged 212 hours of usage per week by 51 people.

Chris Eyanson, who has schizophrenia, once lived in a county home for the mentally ill, where he enjoyed socializing with fellow residents. Now 39, and living on his own in the community, Chris misses the close-knit feeling of communal living. But Chris no longer feels entirely alone. Nick Wolley, a 33-year-old volunteer, has become Chris' best buddy through the Compeer Clubhouse program. "My friendship with Nick helps me get out and see the world," Chris says. "He's generous, he's loving, he's kind and gentle. I don't have a lot of friends. When Nick comes for a visit, it makes the day." Nick and Chris share a love of the outdoors and sports. They have gone fishing together, and are often found at the local bowling alley. Nick, who has experienced his own difficulties, explains that spending time with Chris gives him some perspective on life. "When I see his struggles, it makes me a whole

lot more appreciative of what I have. I spend less time feeling sorry for myself and more time doing worthwhile things for the community."

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Broadening the type of volunteer activities available helped recruit more volunteers to the project.** Not everyone is comfortable immediately beginning a one-to-one relationship with someone who has a mental disability. By giving volunteers an opportunity to test out their interest, through group volunteering, or phone calling, the project expanded its universe of people who could help, and laid the foundation for a possible one-on-one relationships with a consumer.

AFTERWARD (AS OF MARCH 2001)

The project is continuing with funding from Hamilton County. The project has received visits from 10 to 15 other organizations in Iowa interested in starting similar programs. The project director helped with the establishment of a new Compeer program in Iowa City, Iowa.

Prepared by: Susan G. Parker

Reviewed by: Janet Heroux and Molly McKaughan

Program Officers: Paul Jellinek, Rosemary Gibson and Judith Stavisky

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