

Hand In Hand: Supporting the Development of Organizations Run By People with Severe and Persistent Mental Illness

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Introduction

Since 1999, the Self-Help Network: Center for Community Support and Research (SHN) has provided technical assistance to Consumer Run Organizations (CROs) across Kansas in order to promote organizational health and help strengthen capacity among these organizations. Since 2003, the SHN has collected information about the technical assistance that it provides to CROs as part of its partnership with the Kansas Social and Rehabilitation Services (SRS). On an ongoing basis, the SHN analyzes the data from Contact Forms, which document the technical assistance provided to CROs. The information from these analyses is used to help the SHN remain sensitive to the specific needs of CROs when providing capacity-building assistance to these organizations.

Methods

This research examines the types and amount of technical assistance provided to over 20 CROs within the past three years. Twenty categories were created in an attempt to encompass the primary issues facilitators address. The categories are grant writing, quarterly reports, business management, nonprofit status, policy development, activity planning, volunteer development, board development, partnership relations, strategic planning, increasing membership, public awareness, transportation, computer issues, conflict resolution, staffing issues, research activity, CRO startup, space issues, and other.

In order to document the types and amount of assistance offered during each CRO contact, SHN facilitators (who are trained to provide technical assistance) complete a Contact Form each time they provide services to a CRO (this includes both in-person and telephone contacts). The data from the Contact Forms are then analyzed by researchers to generate quarterly Activity Reports, which contain information about the frequency of each type of technical assistance provided to CROs each year, as well as implications of these findings. The data from the Activity Reports collected from 2003-2005 were further analyzed using Microsoft Access and Excel to determine trends in the types of technical assistance provided to CROs.

The Contact Form has undergone several modifications since 2003 in order to accurately capture the types of assistance that are most relevant to the sustainability of CROs. In 2005 the category “space issues” was omitted from the contact form and “CRO startup” was added as a new category. Another modification that has been made is the method of documenting services provided via telephone. In 2003 telephone contacts were not recorded in the Contact Form. However, facilitators began to recognize telephone assistance as a time and cost-efficient method of providing service to CROs. In 2004, telephone contacts exceeding 30 minutes were included in the tracking form. In FY2005, all telephone contacts were documented.

Findings

Consistency of Services

The consistency of the five types of technical assistance most commonly provided to CROs (i.e. grant writing, quarterly reports, business reporting and management, board development, and conflict resolution) from 2003 to 2005 has several possible explanations.

First, these five types of technical assistance are primarily based on general nonprofit management skills. Therefore, CROs are not unlike many other nonprofit organizations across the state in that they require assistance in these areas to effectively run their organizations. Based on its experience in working with various other organizations, the Self-Help Network has found that these are also major issues faced by most other organizations and businesses. It is not surprising, then, that these are the most frequent types of assistance requested by CROs.

Second, due to the nature of leadership within CROs, it is expected that these five forms of technical assistance are the primary services provided to organizations. The regular turnover rate of management is a factor that heavily influences the types of assistance that CROs need. Board members must be properly trained and educated to run these organizations. However, because new leaders often lack the corporate and business-related skills and experiences that are associated with the top five types of assistance previously mentioned, the Self-Help Network must continuously address these issues in order to increase leadership effectiveness among CROs.

An implication of these findings is that rather than providing business skills solely to board members and directors, these types of technical assistance should also be provided to other CRO members as well. Providing education and training for these skills to more members may be more time-efficient than focusing on single individuals during leadership transition periods. SHN facilitators can optimize organizational effectiveness by increasing overall understanding of these top five aspects of organizational management among all CRO members.

Increased Tracking Sensitivity

The Self-Help network has gradually included the tracking of telephone contacts over the past three years. In 2003 telephone contacts were not recorded in the Contact Form. In 2004, only telephone contacts exceeding 30 minutes were included in the form. In 2005, all telephone contacts were documented. This may help explain the considerable increase in total contacts provided to CROs from 2003 to 2005. The Self-Help Network understands the importance of being sensitive to the needs of CROs and continues to develop methods to better document services provided to these organizations in response to those needs. This information can be used to better understand which forms of technical assistance are most effective and efficient in providing in-person and telephone assistance.

Importance of Telephone Assistance

There has been an increase in the Self-Help Network's utilization of telephone contacts as an economic approach to providing technical assistance to CROs. Due to the fact that many CROs are dispersed across Kansas, telephone contact has been efficient in regularly monitoring the progress of CROs as well as providing them with needed information.

It is important to note, however, that in-person contact still remains crucial to the organizational development of CROs. In order to provide assistance that is tailored to the needs of these diverse organizations, it is necessary to observe their environment and interact with members. Further, many types of technical assistance provided by the Self-Help Network would be most effective when implemented in-person (e.g., board development and strategic planning).

Conclusion

The data from the research provides insight on ways to optimize methods of providing technical assistance to Kansas CROs. Remaining sensitive to trends in technical assistance will help facilitators focus on key issues that are primary in maintaining the stability of Kansas CROs.