

Science to Service and Service to Science with Kansas Consumer-Run Organizations

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Abstract. Consumer run organizations (CROs) are run by persons with severe and persistent mental illness and provide a place for those with mental illness to interact with others in the community. The Self-Help Network: Center for Community Support and Research at has been involved in several projects surrounding these organizations for a number of years. These projects have integrated scientific research with service to the organizations. One example provided includes an organizational health assessment (science) with individualized reports to each CRO (service). The other includes technical assistance provided to CROs (service) that incorporates the development of a tracking report (science). A current, ongoing project with CROs is described, which includes two components. The first component is to develop a best practices model, and the second component includes measuring the effectiveness of these organizations and their impact on members. This project will use various types of data collection and analyses, including member interviews, observational data, staff interviews, comparison data, and quantitative and qualitative analyses. In addition, the partnerships developed between the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the Self-Help Network, and CROs is discussed.

1. Introduction

The Self-Help Network: Center for Community Support and Research at Wichita State University, has had a long partnership with Kansas Consumer-Run Organizations (CROs). This professional partnership, funded by Kansas Social and Rehabilitation Services, is commonly referred to as the Consumer Empowerment Project. This project includes several different research projects, and collaboration and assistance between the Self-Help Network and CROs. The Self-Help Network provides technical assistance to Consumer-Run Organizations, including grant writing assistance, business management assistance, and board development. Each CRO in Kansas has one technical assistance provider with the Self-Help Network. In addition, the executive directors of these organizations get together several times a year. This group is known as the CRO Network. These leaders come together to share information and insights about running their individual organizations. Furthermore, each year the Self-Help Network holds a Recovery Conference for mental health consumers statewide. This partnership has many benefits, including research opportunities and support of these important grassroots organizations. As the current projects presented describe, the research (or science) conducted benefits the organizations by providing valuable information that is used in future planning and development of the organizations. The service provided to these organizations also provides an avenue for research. By tracking the service provided to these organizations, the researchers can determine what types of assistance are most needed and most beneficial to the organizations.

The research being conducted with Kansas CROs is ongoing. Recent projects include taking a deeper look at members, leaders, and different activities at CROs. This research will help to determine what the “best practices” are for CROs as a whole. There are several other states around the country that are currently developing or working with CROs, and this research will help to further the knowledge of how CROs can impact members’ lives. While this presentation only describes some of the research currently being conducted, it emphasizes the importance of the connection between science and service.

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

The first project described, the Organizational Health project, involved interviewing 250 members of CROs across Kansas. These interviews asked a variety of questions, including member participation experiences,

relationships with others in the organization, perceptions of the CRO, rules, organizational functioning, and member coping. Factor analyses revealed the two independent and distinct factors of consumer impact and organizational effectiveness. These two factors related to the overall “Organizational Health” of the organization. Consumer impact refers to the social environment found within the CRO and the benefits it provides for members. Mental health consumers often have a difficult time making friends or integrating themselves into the environment around them, and are often socially isolated. CRO settings provide an environment rich with support and relationship-building opportunities that are beneficial for members. The second factor, organizational effectiveness, refers to how well-functioning an organization is in regards to staying open, bringing in new members, and the effectiveness of running the organization. Overall, these results indicated that the supportive environment provided by CROs and the ability to keep the organizations running effectively are the most important contributors to the overall health of the organization.

The second project described, Tracking Services Provided, involved keeping records of the type and amount of technical assistance provided to CROs. This assistance included twenty-one different types of assistance and how often the assistance was provided to each CRO via the technical assistance provider from the Self-Help Network. This technical assistance was provided in-person, over the telephone, or by email. This analysis revealed that, over the past three years this data was collected, five types of assistance were consistently needed by CROs. These types of assistance included: grant writing, quarterly reports, business management, board development, and conflict resolution. This analysis was beneficial to CROs and technical assistance staff because it led to insights about the types of help needed. For instance, these types of technical assistance were needed over and over again because the leadership of these organizations was changing often. Therefore, based on this information, technical assistance providers and CROs turned their focus to training more leaders and planning for leadership transition. The information provided by this research was helpful because it led CROs and technical assistance providers to focus on more pressing issues which will benefit the organizations over time.

3. Conclusions

The research conducted with CROs by the Self-Help Network allows for insights that continuously help to develop the strength and sustainability of these emerging, grassroots organizations. Through the ongoing research and partnership with these organizations, the Self-Help Network is able to provide information that will continually improve the impact these organizations have on their members. This not only benefits CROs as organizations, but also benefits many CRO members and future members throughout the community. By providing these important services, CROs are helping to improve the overall well-being of mental health consumers. Finally, by using research to progressively guide the technical assistance provided to the organizations, technical assistance in the future will become more guided and focused to the most important needs of these organizations.

4. Acknowledgements

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