

## **Recommendations of the FUTURES Peer Support Workgroup**

The purpose of this document is state clearly, concisely, and with consensus, the recommendations of the FUTURES Peer Support Workgroup toward enhancing Vermont's community-based mental health care system and reducing reliance upon the Vermont State Hospital.

The Workgroup recommends that the Department of Mental Health and State Legislature support a Peer-Run Crisis Alternative House. The House will provide an evidenced-based option for people experiencing psychological distress to engage in principles of recovery and peer support. The intended outcome is for individuals both to avert hospitalization and to emerge from crisis with wisdom and skills for living well. Such an option is necessary because Vermont's current mental health system relies upon a Medical Model approach to crisis that includes the almost automatic administration of medication, focus upon symptomology and "accepting diagnosis," locked and/or restricted-access facilities, and the employment of staff trained primarily in the psychologies or medical professions.

The Peer-Run Crisis Alternative House will operate within an entirely different paradigm. This paradigm values mutually supportive relationships between staff and guests, is pro-choice on medication use, uses non-medical language, provides a flexible structure and homelike environment, encourages personal responsibility, offers self-empowerment resources and a peer warm line, and approaches crisis holistically as an opportunity to grow, shift, and change.

Logistically, the House will serve no more than 5 individuals at a time, for no more than 2 weeks at a time. We will accept anyone in crisis who is willing to abide by basic safety guidelines, who has a residence to return to, and who willingly desires to approach crisis in a non-traditional way. The House will operate as its own entity, utilizing Vermont Psychiatric Survivors as a non-profit source for administrative tasks, and will work in collaboration with Vermont's current mental health agencies. It will be operated and staffed entirely by people who have experienced psychological crisis who meet and display all of the criteria necessary for practicing intentional peer support.

We believe that the Peer-Run Crisis Alternative House will help reduce the overall need for the Vermont State Hospital by providing a community-based alternative for people in crisis

to work through their distress in a humane and compassionate manner. We believe that a peer support approach reduces the likelihood that an individual will become aggressive and dangerous, thereby reducing – though not entirely eliminating – the need for beds in a locked state facility.

A Peer-Run Crisis Alternative House not only provides Vermonters with much-needed options for their mental health, but is also aligned with federal initiatives to transform the mental health system to a more recovery-oriented approach that values peer services across the country. It is also highly economical, with the entire cost of operating such a facility almost certainly lower than the near \$400,000 per person that is required to keep one individual in the Vermont State Hospital for a year.

We have identified three phases for our proposal. Phase One consists of consolidating our ideas into a coherent proposal and gaining support from the Transformation Council and the Department of Mental Health; Phase Two consists of hiring a Project Development Coordinator to create a formal business plan and Request for Proposals; Phase Three consists of leasing or building the House, hiring and training staff, and beginning operations. We are at the end of Phase One, and are currently requesting that the Transformation Council and State Legislature formally support our efforts so that we can begin Phase Two.

We recognize that there may be many questions not previously answered in our presentation and this brief proposal. To move this process along in a fair and expedient way, we request that if the Transformation Council, the Department of Mental Health or the State Legislature would like to have more dialogue before formally supporting our efforts, then a meeting be held within the next two months that is dedicated entirely to doing so.

Respectfully,

Members of the FUTURES Peer Support Workgroup