

## NEW PERSPECTIVES

## Wellness City: An Integrated Approach to Whole Person Wellness

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**P**eople with serious mental illness can and do recover. We have seen thousands of people who experience mental health and substance use challenges recover. We have seen it so many times that we have moved past hoping recovery will happen and into knowing recovery will occur. We expect it and eagerly await its arrival. However, we have also come to recognize that too often recovery happens in spite of us. Access to the range of health care and recovery supports is fragmented and complicated. Individuals served in the public system often have to navigate three or more agencies, providers, and systems. Primary health care is provided through the state's Medicaid program. Mental health services operate in a silo and are separately funded. Employment supports are provided through the Rehabilitation Services Agency. Housing is delivered through specialized behavioral health-supported housing agencies. Recovery and peer supports are provided by yet another group of organizations. For people with multiple complex needs, the system is confusing at best. The result? People with serious mental illness (SMI) have a life expectancy of 25 years less than the general public due to chronic medical illnesses like diabetes, cardiovascular and metabolic disease, obesity, high cholesterol, dyslipidemia, respiratory problems, and cancer. The Recovery Innovations Wellness City offers an alternative.

While inability to communicate physical complaints is often cited as a root cause of poor outcomes among people with SMI, other factors may contribute to poor health. Stigma and discrimination against people with SMI may be institutionalized by primary care physicians themselves

who report that patients with SMI are "difficult and time consuming" and feel a general sense of uneasiness working with them. Physician perceptions and feelings can result in two critical treatment failures. The first is "therapeutic nihilism," which is a failure to provide enough information for patients to make informed decisions about their health. The second is "diagnostic overshadowing." Diagnostic overshadowing occurs when the physician attributes physical illness to mental illness and assumes the person is attention seeking, exaggerating, or having panic. Diagnostic overshadowing can result in poor treatment, disregard of serious symptoms, and unnecessary mortality. The integrated holistic approach of Wellness City offers an alternative.

Recovery Innovations is a nonprofit agency providing community-based mental health and addiction treatment services in 22 communities in six states using a recovery paradigm. While we celebrate the success of recovery, every week someone dies—sometimes by suicide but more often from poor health and inadequate health care. Barbara was 45 years old when she died. She completed the Recovery Innovations 80-hour training in peer support and was hired as a peer-support specialist by a local case management agency. Barbara had rediscovered herself. Her new job provided her with meaning and purpose once again. We maintained contact for several weeks, but then she stopped showing up for work, and we lost contact. A few weeks later we learned she had been hospitalized at a local psychiatric hospital where she died of kidney failure, undiagnosed and untreated. Stories like this are tragic and all too frequent.

The Wellness City framework offers an alternative through an integrated coordinated approach. Established and built upon the principles of freedom, equality, responsibility, and rights, Wellness City citizens develop their own personal recovery plan focused on the physical, emotional, intellectual, social, occupational, and spiritual domains of wellness. They are also supported to achieve success in community living, financial management, and recreation/leisure. Services are provided through wellness courses; recovery education; housing assistance; employment counseling; and coordination of social, financial, and emotional support. Wellness City improves access to integrated holistic care using an integrated team of health care professionals, peer-support specialists, and peer whole-health coaches.

Over the past several years, Recovery Innovations, which is based in Phoenix, AZ, has developed and delivered Wellness City programs in seven communities in four states. While we have refined the model, our efforts to help citizens achieve improved physical health and wellness have been marginal. Due to separate funding streams and service delivery systems, physical health care has not been integrated within Wellness City. However, recent breakthroughs in policies and funding have created the opportunity for an integration of physical and behavioral health care. Now a pilot initiative is being launched to add co-located and integrated primary care, along with nurse wellness coordinators and peer whole-health coaches. We expect to see increased wellness through easy access to care in settings where citizens feel safe and have a sense of belonging. Addi-

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tionally, extra emphasis will be placed on patient follow-up. Peer coaches will be available to help citizens track and attend health care appointments and develop self-advocacy skills. Having the primary care physician co-located and integrated with the recovery team will create ease of communication and teamwork among Wellness City team members. Service quality will increase due to the interaction between peer-support team members in other Wellness City peer-run programs such as supported housing, employment counseling, recovery education, and recreational activities.

Over the past decade, Recovery Innovations has created a peer-support workforce that is regarded as the largest in the world. Two thirds of Recovery Innovations employees at 22 locations in five states and New Zealand are individuals in recovery (more than 425 employees) working in dedicated peer-support roles and engaged at every level of the organization. Recovery Innovations has trained and certified more than 5,000 peer-support specialists around the world. The result of this new mental

health model has been a new recovery-based health care workforce. In addition to the increased wellbeing of people served by peer support, the people trained to provide peer-support services report enhanced self-esteem and empowerment as well as significant reduction in the use of public benefits. In a recent survey of Recovery Innovations peer-support employees, 59% reported discontinuation of cash benefits as a result of their employment. Furthermore, 45% reported no longer receiving Medicaid. Overlaying all of these positive outcomes of employment is the fact that during this study, \$7.8 million was paid in wages to peer-support specialists, with \$1.1 million paid in federal taxes alone. The creation of this new peer workforce will be continued and expanded through the Wellness City Integrated Health Home.

Another aspect of this innovative program is a proposed partnership with the residency training program at St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center. An integrated medical care team will provide primary care at Wellness City. By learning and prac-

ticing from a recovery perspective, resident physicians and other staff members will acquire a deeper knowledge of the needs of people with mental health challenges and a more hopeful, less stigmatized perspective on caring for this population. As the new physicians go on to independent practice, the wisdom they gained through working on this unique project will exponentially increase understanding as they work side by side with their colleagues. Residents and their medical team members, within the context of a recovery model, will learn the skills of coordinating and connecting community-based resources to positively impact decision-making related to medical care and personal and social wellbeing while engaging patients in their own self-care.

We believe that we can improve the health and quality of life for people with SMI. Wellness City is one solution that will move us forward. We look forward to sharing the results of Wellness City as an integrated whole-health approach in the near future.

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