Peers are a Dime a Dozen???

By Maura Kelley, CPRP, MHPC Director

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Yesterday I had lunch with a fellow colleague who also runs a Peer Run-Lead-Driven agency. He was telling me he was at a meeting with many executives of traditional behavioral health agencies and hospitals, where one executive said "Peers are a dime a dozen."

Well, of course that really bothered me. I've been a paid Peer for over 21 years, here at the WNYIL with MHPC. I've been the only Director of MHPC since it came into existence in the early 2000's. I think, if only if it was so simple. Just hire anyone with a mental health diagnosis, then you have a MHPC Peer. I think not. Maybe at some agencies hiring a "client" or someone who identifies themselves as a " Peer" is acceptable and is a "dime a dozen", but this in no way shape or form what makes a MHPC peer.

I could continue to rattle off the job qualifications we require when hiring Peers. But being a MHPC Peer takes guts, courage, integrity, pride, tenacity, open mindedness, acceptance, negotiation skills, ethics, values, individuality, and risk. These are the qualities needed to push the behavioral health system and the community to respect and accept the rights, freedom, dignity, and choices of those with behavioral health issues. Despite what "others" think, want, or perceive what is best for an individual, MHPC Peers stand on their own as every U.S. citizen, for every right we have, today, as being an American. MHPC Peers hold the system and question the behaviors of some providers who, may think they are doing the right thing, but infringe on our rights of confidentiality, parenthood, freedom, dignity of those with behavioral health issues. MHPC Peers speak in the media and community forums educating the community on understanding behavioral health issues by sharing their own experience.

MHPC Peers do this because they have had the realization that they have been oppressed by family, behavioral health system, the criminal justice system and/or the community just because of their own behavioral health issues. This oppression is crafted and molded into positive action to advance the quality of life for our brothers and sisters with behavioral health issues, MHPC Peers are not co-opted to act and think like those who present themselves as "knowing better for" those they serve. MHPC Peers are a team of brothers and sisters holding each other to high standards of integrity to always protect the rights, freedom, choices, of those they serve, because they do not forget where they, too, have come from. We keep on reminding each other as an agency. "They are us, we are them."

Within the first year of employment at MHPC, the MHPC Peers are highly trained on the 8 dimensions of wellness developed by our colleague Peggy Swarbrick, that SAMSHA indicates are the cornerstones of recovery. In the forefront of every MHPC peer delivery of services is another colleague, Sherry Mead's, model of Intentional Peer Support. Mary Ellen Copeland's evidenced based WRAP's are trained to MHPC staff, by the Copeland Center trained trainers annually. Trauma Informed Care is provided to MHPC staff by national presenters of Mental Health Empowerment Center for two days of training during the year. The skills of Advocacy are honed in, practiced, and exercised throughout MHPC peer employment.

MHPC Peer Programs have also been a part of several groundbreaking research projects in collaboration with the University of Buffalo Family Medicine, New York State Mental Hygiene Research Department, Columbia University Mental Hygiene Research Project. MHPC peer programs and advocacy issues are cited and featured in many national publications including the National Commission on Human Rights, American Psychiatric Journal of Medicine, American Rehabilitation. MHPC's face has been shown presenting peer advocacy issues featured on national CBS and CNN news. MHPC peer programs have been presented on local, state, and National platforms. MHPC staff sit on State government boards, including Governor Coumo's Behavioral Health Advisory Committee, NYS Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Mental Illness, Governor Coumo's Alliance Inclusion Workforce Network, and State and local Board of Directors. MHPC has also received numerous advocacy, exemplary programs, and professional of the year awards presented by Government, State, and Local agencies.

The MHPC mission is "Peers Empowering Peers Together" it is because of our history, values, beliefs, integrity, training received, contributions to research, contributions to media, educating the Country, and recognitions received that this is true.

"Peers a Dime a Dozen." I don't think so...at least not MHPC Peers.

And oh...this article doesn't even mention our phenomenal recovery outcomes that will be presented in my next article.