



Knowledge is the key to open new doors

Technical Assistance Guide

Serving on Boards and Committees

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Introduction

The National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse has prepared this Technical Assistance Guide as a tool to help mental health consumers serve on the boards and committees that shape mental health policy. In recent years, local, state, and federal governments have formed advisory committees in order to get consumer input. Also, both nonprofit and for-profit corporations have begun to include more consumers on their boards of directors and committees.

By serving on these boards and committees, consumers can have an impact on mental health policy. These groups have a variety of names, but “no matter what the name, any group of people that sets mental health policy should include consumers,” says Clearinghouse executive director Joseph Rogers. “For years, the mental health system made decisions without asking for our input. Now that they’re asking for our input, we have to learn how to serve on boards and committees in a way that our input is valued and we are not just token members,” he continues.

This Technical Assistance Guide explains how to become an effective member of a board or committee. Topics include: how to get involved as a consumer advocate, how to locate opportunities for serving on boards and committees, what to expect while serving, and how to be an effective member.

This Guide was prepared based on interviews with a number of people calling themselves mental health consumers, psychiatric survivors, and other terms, but for the sake of brevity, we often use the term “consumer” alone.

Understanding boards and committees

When the mental health consumer movement began years ago, we advocated primarily from outside the system. We weren't invited to the meetings at which decisions were made about us. In recent years, this has begun to change, as consumers have begun to serve on the boards and committees that shape mental health policy at the local, state, and federal level.

In a bureaucracy like the mental health system, individuals make very few policy decisions are made by individuals; rather, groups often called boards of directors, committees, commissions, advisory boards, or task forces make most policy decisions. Every corporation, both for-profit and nonprofit, has a board of directors, and almost every board of directors has committees that discuss specific issues. Also, governments bodies at all levels form advisory committees to help them make policy decisions, and these advisory committees usually include members of the general public.

The importance of consumer involvement

Should consumers get involved with boards and committees? Absolutely: boards and committees plan mental health services, and only the people who experience mental health services firsthand can truly evaluate how well they work. As Toni Turner of Tupper Lake, New York, says, "Having been hospitalized in both private hospitals and a public institution, I have seen, felt, tasted, and lived the life that most of the discussions relate to."

Some advocates feel that their presence on boards and committees can have an impact because their opinions on treatment contrast with those of provider members. "The psychiatrists determine what 'appears' to work. But we're the only ones who can tell them what really does work. Psychiatric survivors are the only ones who can really tell them why the things that they think work don't," says Kelli Hitsman of Iowa.

Some people have found boards and committees to be a tool for selling the mental health system on a "recovery vision," meaning that the goal of treatment should be helping people to recover fully rather than stabilizing people's symptoms. Tom Lane of New Mexico says that "consumers moving toward wellness and recovery" are in the best position to discuss "recover-centered activities." Consumers who have made steps in their own recovery can help to convince the mental health system that it should help others to recover as well.

Consumers also can bring perspective on the effectiveness of support systems. Howard Trachtman of Massachusetts says that in his experience, "When discussions came to issues like Social Security representative payees, everybody was all ears because they knew that I had been through it."

Your firsthand experience with the mental health system can have an impact on protecting the rights of people in the mental health system. “We’ve been there,” says David Oaks, co-coordinator of Support Coalition International, “so often we are more willing to hold the line when it comes to basic human rights issues.”

By participating on a board or committee, you can also help to influence the way that the other members look at the issues. Advocate Brian McLaughlin of Erie, Pennsylvania, says, “The presence of consumers on a board raises the sensitivity of board members and exposes them to a valuable personal perspective lacking [in] many organizations. It helps leaders and front line staff to get to know consumers as real people, capable people, rather than simply a group to be managed.”

Consumer advocates have also reported that their involvement in boards and committees has helped to increase the cultural competency of mental health services. “Most of the work I’ve done has been with consumers. So most of what I bring to the group is my own personal experience and cultural awareness. What works for one ethnic group, like Native Americans, might not be workable or useable for other groups,” says Hitsman.

Consumer involvement can also bring new perspectives to boards and committees that deal with disability issues generally. At the time Carmen Lee, director of Stamp Out Stigma in Belmont, California, started serving on her county’s Commission on Disabilities, all of the members represented people with physical disabilities.

“Believe it or not,” she says, “not one of them thought that mental illness was in the same category as physical disabilities. They are not insensitive people, but like most of the public, they just hadn’t thought of mental illness as being a real disability.” Now, she says, “I truly believe that they are much more receptive, and do include mental health in all their negotiations with the county Board of Supervisors.”

Locating opportunities for involvement

Many aspects of the mental health services and support services you receive have their basis in boards and committees of various types. Whether you receive health care through public programs, such as Medicaid or Medicare, or through private providers, boards and committees have an impact on you and other people like you.

Some advocates would say that there are really *no* boards or committees that wouldn’t benefit from consumer involvement. However, many consumers point to certain types of boards and committees on which consumer involvement is especially useful. Also, many boards and committees actively solicit consumer involvement.

Government/public sector committees

At the city, county, state, and federal levels, government agencies form committees—often called commissions, advisory councils, or task forces—to help them make

decisions. The types of opportunities that exist vary from place to place, and the same basic type of committee might have different names from place to place.

Following is a list of general categories of government committees that affect mental health consumers and therefore should (or must, by law) include us in their membership. (You should be able to find many of these agencies listed in the government “blue pages” of your phone book.)

- *State Mental Health Planning Councils.* By federal law, states applying for federal “block grant” money for mental health services must assemble a State Mental Health Planning Council that develops a plan for the grant’s use and evaluates mental health services in the state. This planning council must include significant consumer and family member involvement. Your state department of mental health might also have area advisory councils. If you are not sure how to contact your state’s department of mental health, contact the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors (NASMHPD), which is listed under *Resources*.
- *Medical Care Advisory Committees (MCACs).* Medicaid is a joint state/federal program that provides health insurance for many mental health consumers. Medicaid law requires each state’s Medicaid agency to form a MCAC and include consumers in its membership. The agencies must consult the committees before implementing major policy changes. Call your state’s Medicaid agency for information about its MCAC; if you’re not sure how to contact your state’s Medicaid agency, contact the National Association of State Medicaid Directors (NAMSD), which is listed under *Resources*.
- *Protection and Advocacy advisory boards.* Each state has a Protection and Advocacy (P&A) that represents the rights of people with disabilities. Each P&A agency must have an advisory board comprising at least 50% consumers and family members. Contact your state’s P&A for details. If you don’t know how to contact your state’s P&A, contact the National Association of Protection and Advocacy Systems (NAPAS), which is listed under *Resources*.
- *CMHS task forces/ peer review committees.* The Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS), a federal agency that oversees state mental health funding and many other programs, has opportunities for consumer involvement in task forces and peer review committees. Contact CMHS about opportunities for consumer involvement.
- *Community Mental Health Centers.* Your local Community Mental Health Center should have a board of directors, as well as committees dealing with specific topics, such as a Human Rights Committee.
- *Other opportunities.* Many local governments have disability commissions that advise the government about disability issues generally. Similarly, many mayors’ or governors’ offices form task forces to study disability or mental health issues. The best way to find out about such opportunities is to become involved with local

advocacy groups, which usually find out about these opportunities when they become available.

Corporate boards and committees

Every corporation, for-profit or nonprofit, is required by law to have a board of directors, which is responsible for making major policy decisions and hiring a president or executive director to handle daily operations. The make-up of this board of directors is governed by the corporation's "bylaws." Many corporations dealing with healthcare or mental health issues have bylaws mandating some sort of recipient involvement. Some nonprofits, especially advocacy groups, require majority consumer or majority consumer/family membership on the board.

Each board of directors also includes committees that meet to discuss particular tasks such as finances, fundraising, public relations, and personnel. Many organizations also have committees that deal with specific issues such as human rights, advocacy, and consumer satisfaction. These committees often include people who are not on the board of directors, thereby increasing the number of people who can get involved.

Clearinghouse executive director Joseph Rogers says that these committees can be an excellent opportunities for consumers. "Serving on a committee can be more strategic than serving on a board of directors," he says. If you join a committee that focuses on a topic that's important to you, then you can devote more of your time to issues that really matter. Also, you can often influence the board indirectly because boards usually accept the recommendations of committees.

Serving on a committee of a board of directors also makes you a natural candidate when the board itself is looking for new members. Says Carmen Lee, "I urge other consumers who are interested in serving on boards to volunteer on subcommittees and get a feel for the way they work."

Some examples of corporations on which consumers serve either on boards or committees include:

- Local providers, such as managed care organizations, hospitals, day treatment programs, or clubhouses. Many providers have established consumer advisory boards or consumer/family member advisory boards.
- Local and state chapters of the National Mental Health Association (NMHA), the International Association of Psychosocial Rehabilitation Services (IAPSRs), the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI), the National Depressive and Manic Depressive Association (DMDA), and other groups. Each of these organizations is listed under *Resources*.

- Local nonprofit social service corporations, such as a United Way, seniors group, civil rights group, or any other group that could benefit from a greater awareness of mental health issues.

Getting onto a board or committee

The large number of consumers who are serving on boards and committees nationwide proves that, while it might not be easy work, consumers can get themselves appointed to boards and committees. By using a step-by-step approach, you'll find that you can get involved too. If you're not already involved in advocacy, getting involved should be your first step. You can attend meetings of boards and committees as you become more familiar with the issues and then go through the formal application process.

Preliminary steps: getting noticed

Getting yourself selected to serve on a board or committee requires getting yourself noticed. Once you've identified some boards or committees in your area, based on the suggestions in *Locating opportunities for involvement*, you should start attending meetings. Most meetings of government committees and nonprofit boards and committees are open to the public, so you should try to attend a variety of meetings so that you can get a feel for what these boards and committees do.

At first, you might feel more comfortable just listening and learning. Observation helps you to get a feel for the way the group operates, the personalities of the members, and the types of issues dealt with. Also, says Toni Turner, "You don't need to be vocal to become recognized. Eventually someone will walk up to you and ask your name and what your interest is."

Many advocates feel that attending meetings before getting involved as a member of a board or committee was well worth the time. Joyce Brooks is program coordinator of the Circle of Hope Drop-In Center in Vancouver, Washington. She says that before she applied to a board, "I attended their monthly meetings for a year and a half. I visualized what it would be like [to be a member] and asked questions of staff people about expectations for board members, as well as background material to prepare myself."

Many boards and committees allow time for public comment, and some consumers have found this to be a useful time to offer input. Of course, offering a different perspective is also a way to get the board or committee to notice you. Be sure to respect the board's procedures and not speak out of turn; you don't want to draw negative attention to yourself.

Boards and committees are also likely to notice you if you become known as someone who is knowledgeable about mental health issues. Becoming involved with a self-help or advocacy group is an excellent way to learn. Also, if you are associated with a group of people, boards and committees will more likely see you as a representative of consumer opinions.

If you'd like to become a better advocate, you can refer to the Clearinghouse Technical Assistance Guide, *Systems Advocacy*. Among other topics, *Systems Advocacy* discusses

writing opinion pieces for your local newspaper, which is another way to get yourself known as an authority on mental health issues.

The nomination and application process

Once you've identified a board or committee on which you'd like to serve, try to find out more about the board or committee itself, as well as the organization or government agency that it serves.

On Our Own of Maryland, Inc., a statewide consumer group that conducts training on board and committee service, recommends that if you are interested in serving on the board of a nonprofit organization, then you should call to request:

- § the most recent annual report;
- § a brochure explaining the organization's services;
- § the mission statement;
- § a list of current board members;
- § a list of current committees; and
- § the current level of fundraising (Holmes and Kadis 19).

After reviewing the information that you gather, you should also inquire about the application and nomination process. Boards and committees follow set procedures for selecting new members, but these procedures can vary from board to board or committee to committee. For some boards and committees, you can apply directly for a position as if you were applying for a job. For others, you might need to be nominated by a current board or committee member.

If you are apprehensive about approaching an organization about a position on a board or committee, you can prepare beforehand, says Naomi Armstrong of the Peer Educators Project in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "Write a script in which you include only the main points that you want to make. Tailor your remarks: you might develop a short one-size-fits-all script and then insert 'I'm a Social Security recipient,' or 'I've been through rehabilitation a couple of times now,' depending on who you're approaching," she suggests.

As part of the application process, you generally need to prepare a résumé. (If you need help with résumé writing, you should be able to find numerous books at your local bookstore or library; also, many social service agencies provide help in preparing résumés.) You should try to tailor your résumé to stress your qualities that would make you desirable as a board or committee member. These might include:

- § formal education and training;
- § training in a profession or trade;
- § life experiences from paid or volunteer work;

- § general skills, such as planning, accounting, public relations, marketing, fundraising, service delivery, and advocacy;
- § skills in problem-solving, such as negotiation or mediation;
- § character and integrity; and
- § personal experience in the mental health system (Holmes and Kadis 16).

In addition to your résumé, it is usually helpful to have a letter of recommendation. If possible, you should ask someone who is respected in the community and preferably known by board members. When you ask someone to write you a letter of recommendation, you should provide an updated résumé. Of course, it will be easier for you to find someone to write a letter on your behalf if you have been active in advocacy for a while than it will be as you are just starting out. Don't be discouraged, and stay involved with community activities.

Deciding whether a board or committee is right for you

Before agreeing to serve on a board or committee, you should make sure that you can commit the time and energy required for service. Find out how many hours per month you can expect to spend on your duties, and ask yourself realistically whether you have the time and energy to fulfill those duties. "The obligation of a board or committee is not something that anyone should take lightly," says Toni Turner.

In a corporation, board members generally have more duties and responsibilities than committee members, but you should ask what is expected of you. By law, members of a corporation's board of directors have three main duties:

- § *Care*. A board member is expected to use a reasonable amount of care in making decisions that affect the corporation.
- § *Loyalty*. A board member should make decisions that benefit the corporation rather than the board member personally.
- § *Obedience*. A board member must obey the bylaws of the corporation and help to ensure that the corporation itself obeys state and federal laws.

Because board members are responsible for the corporation's conduct, in rare cases, board members are sued in court. Usually, this only happens in cases in which the corporation is purposely defrauding investors, funders, or donors, but to be on the safe side, you should ask whether the corporation provides liability insurance to board members. Many corporations do not provide this insurance, but you can help to protect yourself by preventing a lawsuit before it starts: always act honestly as a board member.

If you are considering serving on a government advisory committee, ask what your obligations would be. These could vary widely: on some, you might be expected only to attend meetings, whereas on others, you might be expected to visit facilities, prepare reports, or perform other duties.

In addition to considering the general duties of a board or committee member, you should consider whether your participation on a particular board or committee would be

worthwhile. Your time is valuable to you, and if participation on a particular board or committee is not likely to produce results, you might be able to find a more useful board or committee position.

Deidre Hammon, coordinator of the Citizen’s Alliance for Disability Rights and Education, recommends, “Before agreeing to serve on a board or committee, ask to see minutes of previous meetings. For boards of directors, ask for the agency mission statement and goals. Have any of these goals been met? How long have they been working on the same issues? If there’s no funding and no progress, then unless you can lead the group, you are likely to end up sitting around in a support group fashion talking about the problem and never getting to the solution of the problem.”

“If it’s an advisory committee,” she continues, “ask for a written statement of purpose, as well as explanation of whom the committee advises. Does the advisory group keep formal minutes and develop formal written recommendations at least annually? Does the advisee *respond* to the recommendations? Effective advisory committees will have an impact, but if there are loose or nonexistent lines of communication, then don’t bother.”

Other questions that will help you to determine whether a particular board or committee will be a valuable use of your time include:

- § Is sufficient time and effort invested in orienting and engaging new board members?
- § Are there constructive relationships with other organizations within the mental health system and with other human service agencies?
- § Is there collaborative effort between staff, board, council, and members of the organization?
- § Does the organization give time and effort to self-evaluation?
- § Does the organization engage in quality control? Does it have a method to evaluate the quality of its services? (Holmes and Kadis 19-20)

In addition to your own personal needs, you should consider how your participation in a board or committee is part of an overall advocacy strategy. David Oaks recommends that you question yourself. “Is your involvement part of an overall plan? Are you connected to a community that has a vision, mission, and goals? If so, then your involvement might result in something in the end. If not, then you may be mainly occupying a chair,” he says.

Being an effective board or committee member

Once you've achieved your goal of being selected to serve on a board or committee, your new goal should be to become an effective participant. Part of being an effective participant is making sure that you get the training and do the preparation necessary to understand the issues you'll be discussing.

You'll also have to understand how the board or committee operates. This will require not only understanding the formal rules of procedure that govern meetings, but also understanding some of the "unwritten rules" of how things really get done.

Of course, as a consumer/survivor, you'll often face special challenges as a board or committee member. You might find that you're treated like a "token" and not given the same respect as other members. You might also find it difficult to have your positions accepted by the membership. In this section, we'll examine some strategies for being an effective board or committee member.

Training and preparation

All boards and committees *should* provide formal training in order to help maximize their members' effectiveness. However, not every board and committee provides this training, and among those that do, the intensity of training can vary widely.

You can often arrange for some helpful training even if minimal or no formal training is provided. You might ask a fellow board or committee member to act as a mentor to you. Toni Turner says that having a "seasoned board member" act as a mentor has helped her "tremendously."

You can also look for assistance from your peers in a self-help/advocacy group. "Peer support from other activists" has helped Canadian advocate Lenny Gagnon understand the "demands and expectations" of serving on boards and committees. "Their lessons saved me a lot of wasted time and energy, and made for more productive participation. . . . For consumer/survivors, the best teachers are those who have traveled and survived before us," he says. In fact, many statewide consumer organizations, such as On Our Own of Maryland, Inc., offer board and committee training for consumers. If you'd like to get in touch with consumer groups in your state, contact the Clearinghouse.

Training will help you adapt to your role as a board or committee member, but in order to continue to be an effective participant, you'll also need to prepare diligently for each meeting. An obvious first step is to read with care any materials that you are given. Be sure that you understand any acronyms or jargon that is used in the materials (or at board meetings).

You can help yourself prepare more effectively and, at the same time, impress your fellow board or committee members by calling them in between meetings to discuss

pending business. Have a set of questions in mind so that the conversation will be brief and to the point. You can also contact staff members of the organization or agency if you're not clear about matters being discussed at the meetings.

Knowing the rules

Most boards and committees follow “parliamentary procedure,” a set of rules that govern the flow of meetings. These rules allow everyone to be heard without interruption and streamline the decision-making process.

A firm understanding of parliamentary procedure will make you a much more effective board member. If you know the procedures, says Joyce Brooks, “People listen more quickly and question less often.” By attending meetings, you will begin to understand parliamentary procedure. If you really want to learn parliamentary procedure, you can read *Roberts Rules of Order*, the most well known book on the subject. However, we'll cover the basics here.

Most boards and committees follow a fixed order of business, for example:

- § Call to order.
- § Roll call of members present.
- § Reading of minutes of last meeting.
- § Officers reports.
- § Committee reports.
- § Unfinished business.
- § New business.
- § Announcements.
- § Adjournment.

Throughout the meeting, members address the board or committee by making “motions.” A motion is basically a proposal on which the board or committee membership can take action. Examples might include moving for consideration of a new proposal or moving for a vote on an idea already discussed. In order to present a motion, you must:

- § Wait until the last speaker has finished.
- § Rise and address the chairperson.
- § Wait until the chairperson recognizes you.
- § Make your motion in a clear and concise manner; always say, “I move that we. . .” rather than, “I move that we do not. . . .”
- § Wait for someone to “second,” or support, your motion.

Once someone seconds your motion, the chairperson will put the motion before the membership for consideration. The membership then either debates your motion or moves directly to a vote. (If there is no second to your motion, then your motion fails.)

If your motion is debated, then as the person who made the motion, you will be allowed to speak first. You—and other members—must address all comments to the chairperson. As you speak, keep to the time limit for speaking that has been established.

After discussion, the chairperson may put the motion to a vote. The method of voting will depend on the bylaws. Typical methods include:

- § *Voice*. The Chairman asks those in favor to say, “aye,” and those opposed to say “no.” Any member may move for an exact count.
- § *Show of hands*. Similar to a voice vote, but members raise hands rather than answering verbally. Again, a member may call for a count.
- § *Roll call*. Each member answers “yes” or “no” as his or her name is called. This method is used when a record of each person’s vote is required.
- § *General consent*. When a motion is not likely to be opposed, the chairperson says, “if there is no objection. . . .” The membership can show agreement by their silence; however, if one member says, “I object,” then the item must be put to a vote.
- § *Ballot*. Members write their vote on a slip of paper; this method is used when secrecy is desired.

Parliamentary procedure is something that is best learned through observation and practice. We also recommend that you find a book about parliamentary procedure at your local bookstore or library. Although *Roberts Rules of Order* is the standard book, you will probably also find books that provide a more general overview of parliamentary procedure.

Knowing the unwritten rules

In addition to knowing formal rules of procedure, you should remember that the most important rule is to be courteous of other members at all times, even if you are discussing emotional issues. Understanding the “rules of conduct concerning attitudes and behavior,” says Kelli Hitsman, “can be quite useful in keeping meetings from turning into personal war grounds.”

It’s important to understand the “who-knows-who” and “behind the scenes” aspects of boards and committees, says David Oaks. This can be frustrating for some newcomers, who feel that the membership is united against them. However, Oaks points out, “Remember that you can take your own initiative and create your own networking behind the scenes, too.”

Brian Cooper, Senior Director of Consumer Advocacy with NMHA, explains that it’s important to understand that the work that you do outside of the meetings can be more important than the formal discussions during the meetings. “Once, when I was in a board of directors meeting,” he says, “I had an idea that I thought was wonderful, and that everyone else would think was wonderful. So at the new business segment of the meeting, I moved that we consider my idea. During discussions, it was decided that we should postpone any decision until the following month.”

“After the meetings,” says Cooper, “a fellow director pulled me aside and said, ‘Don’t you know that you should never propose anything out of the blue like that? I learned an important lesson: that it’s important to talk to people between meetings and generate support for your proposals before you bring them up in a meeting.’”

Overcoming tokenism

In discussions of consumers serving on boards and committees, the topic of tokenism inevitably arises. Tokenism occurs when a board or committee includes one or two consumers to create an appearance of consumer involvement, but fails to value consumer members’ input as much as that of other members. Although many boards and committees place high value on—and benefit from—consumer input, some boards continue to include consumers only as tokens.

Opinions vary on how we should respond to tokenism. Some people, like Tina Minkowitz of Project Release, feel that participating on a board or committee as a token is “destructive and degrading.” Others try to overcome tokenism, but are willing to cut their losses if they feel that fellow members aren’t given them the respect that they deserve.

Many consumers have fought tokenism, even though it can be difficult to bear and can waste time. Alan Lunt serves on the board of the New Jersey IAPSRs chapter and says, “At first, I felt I was a token consumer. The membership includes a liberal sampling of executive directors and many of the remainder are supervisors. Being a lowly worker and the only consumer, I felt like a token with little valuable input.”

However, Lunt stuck with it and continued to expand his experience and education. “I felt my expertise and my value as a board member rise. Last year, I led the committee that advocated we take a stand against outpatient commitment, and that position was adopted by the full board. I now feel I am a valuable asset to the board and can speak with authority and pursue independent initiative. I am not an expert at everything, but I can make my views felt when appropriate.”

Lunt’s story illustrates an important point. In order to increase your credibility with other board or committee members, you should make sure that you come across as a well-rounded person, and not just a “one-trick pony,” focused only on the issues that affect you directly.

Another key to overcoming tokenism is maintaining strong ties to advocacy networks. If you speak as a representative of a strong coalition, your words will carry greater weight even if you are the only consumer on a board or committee.

However, there’s no reason to be the only consumer on the board or committee. “The first thing to do if you find out that you are the only consumer on the board is to bring

other consumers to meetings,” says Joseph Rogers, “and the next step is to try to get them on the board with you.”

Systems advocacy might be necessary if you encounter resistance while trying to increase consumer involvement. Approach the agency with a list of reasons why consumer involvement is important; use the reasons listed in *The importance of consumer involvement* as a starting point. The National Consumer Supporter Technical Assistance Center (NCSTAC) suggests that forming a coalition with other groups, such as family groups, can help to increase stakeholder involvement (NCSTAC, 16).

Another issue that you might want to address through systems advocacy is the providing stipends to consumers who participate on boards and committees. A report published by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) states:

To make consumer involvement effective, consumers who serve on planning committees or other formal bodies should be paid stipends for their time and expenses. All too often, everyone else on such a committee either receives a fee or performs this work as part of a salaried job, while consumers are expected to take time off from their own jobs and lives and pay their own way. Consumers bring a unique and important point of view to the planning process. . . . They should therefore be appropriately compensated for this expertise (*Partners in Planning*, 11).

Getting along without giving in

In order to be an effective board or committee member, you’ll have to learn two interrelated skills: getting along and not giving in. In order to get anything accomplished, you’ll have to get along with fellow members, even when you disagree strongly.

From the beginning, you should try to build personal relationships with other board or committee members. That way, when you disagree on an issue, you have your personal relationship to keep negotiations moving along more smoothly. In its training, *On Our Own of Maryland* offers the following advice:

Discover at least one personal strength in each of your fellow board members and use your respect or admiration to deepen your relationships with them. During times of stress or disagreement, when relationships with your fellow board members are severely tested, discipline yourself to recall those admirable qualities. Your respect may save the day! (Holmes and Kadis 26-27).

You can also build a good working relationship by fellow members by listening to what they have to say, even when you disagree. “Listening to others is a very important part of being a board or committee member. Everyone’s input is important,” says Toni Turner. If you show others the respect of listening to them carefully, then they are more likely to show you the same respect.

Often, negotiation takes time. You might not be able to make major changes immediately after joining a board or committee, but you can set the tone for future changes.

“Sometimes, I had to bide my time to set a framework in which I could make my point,” says Joyce Brooks.

You’re most likely to find that on a board or committee, you’ll get more accomplished if your role is that of an educator rather than an adversary. If you’re the only, or one of the only, consumers on the board or committee, you’re likely to have opinions that differ greatly from other board members. Your job is to educate, whether by using personal accounts, introducing other consumers to the board, or gathering information. By not focusing on attacking other members’ proposals, but pointing out positive alternatives, you’re more likely to accomplish your goals.

In order to be an effective member of a board or committee, you’ll have to learn to compromise. In some cases, it might be difficult to accept what you see as a partial solution, but it might be better than no solution. How you negotiate will depend upon the circumstances, but there are some books that provide excellent guidance.

The book *Getting to Yes* provides an excellent overview of negotiation. Its major theme is that you should concentrate on *interests* rather than *positions*. In other words, rather than worrying what other members’ positions are on the issues, analyze where their interests lie. For example, say that you oppose involuntary outpatient commitment (IOC) and a fellow board member favors it: those are your positions. In this case, it might be that the person’s interest is increasing the number of people who receive treatment. So, you can appeal to this interest by producing a study showing that IOC is not cost-effective and that increasing the availability of voluntary services would better serve the interest of increasing the number of people who receive treatment.

Negotiation involves concessions, but this is not to say that you should go along with decisions with which you firmly disagree. “There’s pressure” for consumer/survivors to compromise their values, says David Oaks, “but as long as we’re connected to each other, we can withstand the pressure to compromise on fundamental human rights issues.”

People often use the term “co-optation” to describe a situation in which consumers begin to identify more strongly with a board or committee than with the consumers whom they represent. “Beware of being co-opted,” warns Joseph Rogers. “If you are on the inside, it is sometimes hard to maintain independence. But if the board or committee does something contrary to what you believe, they must expect that you will object.” When you do object, Rogers says, “Pick your battles.” Try to be someone who is better known for proposing solutions than for raising objections.

With some persistence and practice, you can join the many consumer/survivors who have been able to work within boards and committees and still maintain a firm commitment to your values. “My values have always been very apparent to the ‘powers that be,’” says Toni Turner, “and I refuse to compromise them for anyone. If a board or committee wants me as a member, they have to accept the whole package.”

As you go forward to serve on boards and committees, remember that support is available. You can rely upon local self-help/advocacy groups, and you can request technical assistance from statewide groups and the Clearinghouse. Good luck!

Resources

Organizations

National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse

1211 Chestnut Street, Suite 1207

Philadelphia, PA 19107

(800) 553-4KEY (4539)

<http://www.mhselfhelp.org>

National Mental Health Association/ National Consumer Supporter Technical Assistance Center

1021 Prince Street

Alexandria, VA 22314

(800) 969-NMHA

<http://www.nmha.org>

<http://www.ncstac.org>

National Association of Protection and Advocacy Systems, Inc.

900 Second Street, NE, Ste. 211

Washington, D.C. 20002

(202) 408-9514

<http://www.protectionandadvocacy.com>

National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association

730 N. Franklin Street, Suite 501

Chicago, IL 60610

(800) 826-3632

<http://www.ndmda.org>

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill

2107 Wilson Blvd., Suite 300

Arlington, VA 22201

(800) 950-NAMI

<http://www.nami.org>

International Association of Psychosocial Rehabilitation Services

10025 Governor Warfield Parkway, Suite 301

Columbia, Maryland 21044

(410) 730-7190

<http://www.iapsrs.org>

National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse

Serving on Boards and Committees

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National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors

66 Canal Center Plaza, Suite 302

Alexandria, VA 22314

(703) 739-9333

<http://www.nasmhpd.org>

National Association of State Medicaid Directors

810 First St., NE, Suite 500

Washington, DC 20002

(202) 682-0100

<http://medicaid.aphsa.org/>

Center for Mental Health Services

P.O. Box 42490

Washington, DC 20015

(800) 789-2647

<http://www.mentalhealth.org>

On Our Own of Maryland, Inc.

1521 S. Edgewood St., Suite C

Baltimore, MD 21227-1139

(800) 704-0262

<http://www.onourownmd.org>

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