National Alliance on Mental Illness

Cultural Competence
A Key for Success

The Surgeon General's report *Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General* (1999), acknowledges that not all Americans, especially people of color, receive equal mental health treatment. This finding prompted the Surgeon General to release the supplement, ***Mental Health: Culture, Race, and Ethnicity***, reporting on disparities in mental health care for people of color. The 2001 supplement sends a clear message: **culture counts**.

For people of color, access to mental health services and the quality of services received are greatly affected by the level of cultural competence within the mental health care system. The 2003 report of the **President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health** states that "culturally competent services are essential to improve the mental health system." Goal #3 of this report calls for the elimination of disparities by improving access to care that is culturally competent.

Key Concepts in Cultural Competence

Culture: (a person's beliefs, norms, values and language) plays a key role in how individuals perceive and experience mental illness, whether or not they seek help, what type of help they seek, what coping styles and supports they have, what treatments might work and more. To effectively serve America's diverse populations, mental health systems need to understand, respect and value cultural differences and the key role they play in the delivery of mental health services.

Cultural competence: Defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as "a set of values, behaviors, attitudes and practices within a system that enables people to work effectively across cultures. The term refers to the ability to honor and respect the beliefs, language, interpersonal styles and behaviors of individuals and families receiving services, as well as staff who are providing such services." Another common definition, widely used within mental health, deems cultural competence "a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals that enable effective interactions in cross-cultural situations" (Cross et al., 1989, *Towards a Culturally Competent System of* Care. *Vol:1*).

Key Components of a Culturally Competent System

Organizational commitment: This is demonstrated through the attitudes and beliefs held by the organization in regards to cultural competence. Do the organization's mission statement, guiding principles and practices acknowledge the importance of culture? Does the top leadership embrace and champion cultural competence? Does the organization conduct periodic cultural competence trainings? These are all components of the commitment an organization must make to achieve cultural competence.

Policies and procedures: Well-established policies and procedures will foster cultural competence. Organization should assign responsibility to accomplish cultural competence in service delivery to the board of directors, senior administrators and staff.

Cultural Competence Advisory Committee: Acting in an advisory role to the organization, this committee should provide direction, input and oversight. The committee should reflect the diversity of the communities in which the organization operates and it should have direct and meaningful access to the organization's leadership.

Availability and access to quality services: Research indicates that communities of color face significant barriers accessing quality mental health care. Organizations should pay particular attention to these barriers in order to provide equal access and quality of care. Efforts to overcome these barriers to treatment may include: targeted engagement of multicultural communities, availability of language access services such as multilingual staff and trained interpreters, development of forms and informational materials in other languages, utilization of culture-specific practices, community specific outreach initiatives and others. High quality service is achieved with cultural competence, which allows services to truly become patient-centered, safe and effective.

Human resources: An organization's efforts should include staff training on cultural competence. Staff at all levels in all functions of the organization should be part of such trainings. In addition to training staff, the organization should strive to create a culturally and linguistically diverse workforce. Recruitment, hiring, training and mentoring practices that foster diversity, retention, and promotion of people of color should all be taken into account.

Planning, monitoring, and evaluation: In order to achieve cultural competence in service delivery, an organization should develop a cultural competence plan, closely monitor its implementation and evaluate results. An organizational cultural competence assessment can be a great aid to this process. An important element to consider is the importance to monitor for quality and improvement of practices and programs. Community stakeholders, individuals with mental illness and their families should be part of the monitoring efforts.

Community participation: Efforts made by an organization should include active and meaningful participation of diverse communities. People with mental illness, their families and the community at large should be able to provide input into the programs and services they receive. Community representatives should be part of the planning, implementation and monitoring of cultural competence and the overall delivery of services. To truly achieve community participation, the organization should actively initiate community engagement.

Resources

Cultural Competence Standards in Managed Care Mental Health Services: Four Underserved/ Underrepresented Racial/Ethnic Groups
http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/SMA00-3457/preface.asp

Cultural Competency Resources by the Commonwealth Fund
http://www.cmwf.org/topics/topics.htm?attrib_id=12025

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)
http://nami.org/multicultural

National Center for Cultural Competence
http://www11.georgetown.edu/research/gucchd/nccc/

National Standards on Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS)
http://www.omhrc.gov/

The Provider's Guide to Quality and Culture
http://erc.msh.org/mainpage.cfm?file=1.0.htm&module=provider&language=English