

Research Briefing 5

The Focus Group: A Quality Improvement Tool for the Criminal Justice Coordinating Center of Excellence (Criminal Justice CCoE)

Objectives: In order to promote Best Practices for mental health initiatives, the Ohio Department of Mental Health created Coordinating Centers of Excellence (CCoEs). One such center, the Criminal Justice Coordinating Center of Excellence (Criminal Justice CCoE), provides technical assistance to communities engaged in jail diversion efforts designed to redirect people from the criminal justice system and into the mental health treatment system.

The Criminal Justice CCoE utilized the focus group technique as a quality improvement tool. Focus groups were conducted with key members of the mental health treatment and criminal justice systems. These stakeholders were engaged in the collaborative process of developing and sustaining jail diversion efforts for people with mental illness in the community.

There were two main goals of the focus group sessions. The first goal was to conduct a performance evaluation to determine satisfaction with and opinions about the technical assistance provided by the Criminal Justice CCoE. The second goal was to conduct a needs assessment of the communities in order to measure collaborative jail diversion efforts. Discussion centered on the process of system-wide collaboration related to jail diversion, obstacles the communities face, and strategies for overcoming these obstacles. The basis for the needs assessment portion of the discussion was derived from the Community Readiness Inventory, an instrument developed by the Criminal Justice CCoE in partnership with NAMI-Ohio. The Community Readiness Inventory gauges the level of preparedness for collaboration and jail diversion within a community.

Methods: Three Ohio counties were selected based upon a brief survey of Criminal Justice CCoE representatives to determine the level of involvement within each county. Two counties in which members of the Criminal Justice CCoE reported having intensive contact were selected. Both counties had a well-developed collaborative effort for jail diversion. A third county was selected as an area in which there had been moderate communication between key community stakeholders and members of the Criminal Justice CCoE. At the time of this project, this county was working to develop a collaborative jail diversion program.

When possible, there were separate focus group sessions for the criminal justice and mental health treatment participants to ensure open discussion. Five to ten individuals attended each focus group session, which typically lasted an hour. The sessions were audio-taped for transcription and analysis purposes.

Results: Results indicate that the focus group technique is an appropriate and helpful tool for conducting both a performance evaluation of the Criminal Justice CCoE and a needs assessment of the community. This technique is a cost-effective way to gather information on the community's perspective about the technical assistance provided by the Criminal Justice CCoE, while at the same time increasing understanding of what is happening at the local level. This knowledge contributes to the Criminal Justice CCoE being better able to assist each community.

Research Briefing 5 continued

Related to the first goal of this project, the performance evaluation of the Criminal Justice CCoE, findings indicated ways in which the Criminal Justice CCoE can promote itself more effectively and increase understanding of the assistance it provides to communities. Suggestions included updating and advertising the website and creating e-mail newsletters highlighting events and accomplishments throughout the state. This would also help to connect individuals from different communities with one another, promoting communication and idea sharing.

The second goal of the focus group sessions was to conduct a needs assessment of the community, thus providing the Criminal Justice CCoE with insight related to each individual community. These discussions also highlighted both shared and distinctive aspects of each community in approaches to systemwide collaboration and jail diversion programs. Shared aspects of all three communities included the relationship of the Criminal Justice CCoE with the community, concerns about communication between the mental health treatment and criminal justice systems, and the importance of jail diversion within the community. Additionally, there were also several distinctive features of each community, including the level of awareness of mental illness in the general community, the presence and degree of consumer advocacy group involvement, and funding strategies for jail diversion efforts.

Conclusions: This project has demonstrated that the focus group is an appropriate mechanism that the Criminal Justice CCoE can use in order to meet its goal of quality improvement for the technical assistance it provides. The focus group is also applicable as a needs assessment for individual communities served by the Criminal Justice CCoE. For instance, the Community Readiness Inventory would be particularly well-suited for administration during initial contacts with stakeholders so that the Criminal Justice CCoE can apply community-centered assistance towards the development of jail diversion initiatives. The Community Readiness Inventory would also provide useful information in structuring the focus group discussion around issues related to the community.

For more information regarding the Criminal Justice CCoE in general, please contact Dr. Mark Munetz, Clinical Director, at munetzm@admboard.org, Dr. Christian Ritter, Director of Research and Evaluation, at jritter@kent.edu, or Natalie Bonfine, MA, Research Associate at nbonfine@kent.edu, or visit the website at ww.neoucom.edu/CJCCOE.



Promoting Jail Diversion Alternatives for People with Mental Disorders

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