

NEWS RELEASE

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Three agencies selected for study of consumer/survivor initiatives
Hamilton, Niagara and Waterloo will participate in review of mental-health support system

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WATERLOO – Three mental-health groups in southwestern Ontario will help determine the effectiveness of the province's mental-health support system. Consumer/Survivor Initiatives of Niagara, the Mental-Health Rights Coalition of Hamilton and Waterloo Region Self Help have agreed to participate in a five-year, \$400,000 study that will also recommend improvements to the system.

Funded by the Ontario Mental Health Foundation, *A Longitudinal Study of the Consumer/Survivor Initiatives in Community Mental Health in Ontario* will examine the effectiveness of consumer/survivor initiatives (CSIs). Geoffrey Nelson, a psychology professor at Wilfrid Laurier University, will lead the review of how people dealing with mental-health issues are forming CSIs to help one another.

"The idea that the public is not safe is getting more prominence than it deserves," said Nelson. "Consumer/survivor initiatives are an example of mental-health consumers/survivors interacting with their community in a positive way, but their efforts have been under-researched. We expect that they are successful in helping members recover and that they humanize the mental-health system through advocacy and education."

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Consumers and survivors began to form their own support groups in the 1980s. In 1991, the Ontario government decided to strengthen support for people with serious mental illnesses by funding these groups. There are now more than 50 CSIs across the province.

The CSIs have two objectives. They first aim to provide peer support to members through self-help groups and activities. They also act as advocates – voicing the views of their members, influencing mental-health policies and programs, and educating the public on mental-health issues. Individual CSIs have different organizational structures, but are controlled by the members.

The study will determine how different CSIs impact their communities and the public. It will analyze their effects on individuals and the relationship between consumers/survivors and the system.

"We will be evaluating changes that have occurred as a result of the creation of CSIs," said Nelson. "The study will focus on how CSIs work. Positive features of current CSI approaches will be highlighted and improvements to the mental-health system will be recommended."

Nelson's team sought out the three CSIs who will assist with the study. Seventy-five members were asked to participate; an equal number of consumers/survivors who have not been involved in CSIs will form a comparison group. The 150 consumers/survivors will be interviewed three times over a one-and-a-half year period.

The researchers expect to find that participation in CSIs has a positive effect on members. Those benefits should include: decreased use of mental-health care and improved social supports, personal empowerment, community integration, access to valued resources such as education and housing, and life satisfaction. The benefits should also correlate with increased participation.

The research will also gather information on how CSIs operate. It will outline how members are given the opportunity to contribute to the CSIs, help determine how they are managed, and determine how they provide a psychological sense of community and peer support. Annual workshops will help other interested CSIs across the province tap into the research approaches and findings.

This project is not a part of the province's recently announced review of the Mental Health Act. However, CSIs have an advocacy role and the review gives the researchers a chance to observe it. "We will look at how they react to and interact with the review process," explained Nelson. "The review will be completed and changes implemented before our study finishes. With this information, we can recommend how CSIs can improve their lobbying efforts."

For Nelson, the study continues a five-year research program in community mental health. His work has focused on programs and support for consumers and survivors.

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