KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Item:
Knowledge Management and Consumer-run initiatives

Basis for Discussion:
Knowledge management has been very much in the news in the last several years. It was also a subject for discussion through a paper written on the Knowledge Exchange Network for the proposed National Mental Health Commission. [1] Knowledge and its management is as old as humanity. Nowadays it has become a discipline in its own right. This has happened mainly because of the overwhelming amount of research that is available and particularly it is related to the technology we have today. We hear more and more about best practices; whether it is in administration, health, governance, not-for-profit or corporations. According to an article in Wikipedia [2], knowledge management is ' a range of practices used by organizations to identify, create, represent, and distribute knowledge for reuse, awareness and learning across the organization."[3]. It is a component of organizational learning; but with a particular focus on knowledge as an asset to be cultivated. We are in an information economy and knowledge translates to power and potential effectiveness. More and more funders are demanding accountability and also the use of best practices. Individuals who use the services offered are becoming more aware of what is out there and are exercising their choice with more information in hand. There is a wealth of resources available regarding knowledge and its application in practice. Knowledge Management has arisen as the broad discipline that studies the means to tap into research and successful practices, study what might work, assimilate it and apply it to achieve more effective outcomes. Keeping abreast is necessary and requires consistent and determined organizational effort. This paper briefly looks at some issues that may impact on the use and availability of knowledge for consumers and consumer-run initiatives. It also suggests some options that may be undertaken to assist them.

Analysis:
Knowledge management requires first and foremost the organizational *capacity* to make it a function similar to that of human resources, finances, and governance. If an entity comes up short, there will be greater difficulty in finding relevant material, assessing it, learning what works and possibly applying the practices that would be of benefit for improving and even changing outcomes. Most consumer-run initiatives would find this to be true. At one time, it was hard to find a hand book that would help a group use its resources well. Now, the amount of information on 'termination' would take a good day of one's time to review and learn.

Another factor that might interfere with developing knowledge management for a CSI is *continuity*. It is often quite difficult to get people and keep them on a board for an extended period of time. Continuity provides time to learn and discuss and decide what to do and how to go about it. Having to bring people up to snuff continuously, may have a negative affect on the group process.

Commitment is another issue. It would be no benefit to decide to incorporate the knowledge function and then come up short in implementing it. Organizational change is often a disruptive to process to an organization and its staff, generally speaking. Staff needs to be a part of the process of change and be provided the time to adjust to the new circumstances and most likely changes in job descriptions. The ripples of this new function will be felt throughout the initiative until everyone understands what it is about and how to include it in day to day practice.

Finally, there is *consistency*. This is about having a board committed to developing a climate of keeping abreast of what's new. There is a need to formulate policies and procedures that can be used to guide staff, board and executive roles. These may change from time to time as they would in human resources. Knowledge management will have to become a 'staple' of the organization or it may not hold up under the pressure of the demands made upon it over time.

Target/Audience:
Provincial Governments, pending National Mental Health Commission, Consumer and Family groups, consumers and family members.

Recommendations:
1) A study be undertaken to assess the capacity of consumer-run initiatives to initiate a process of including knowledge management into its operations.
2) The study also includes an investigation into to the most suitable ways that knowledge management can become a part of and consistent with the peer support and mutual aid approach to service.
3) The Coalition and/or NNMH seek funding to undertake items 1 and 2 above.
4) The Coalition and/or NNMH develop a proposal for a technical assistance centre that will train and guide initiatives through the developmental process; as well as, over time.

Documentation:
[1] Michael Kirby and Howard Chodos, The Role, Functions and Structure of the Knowledge Exchange Network, December 2006
[2] Knowledge Management, Wikipedia, website,
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knowledge_Management
[3] Ibid, page 1