

STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION AND THE MENTAL HEALTH CONSUMER/SURVIVOR MOVEMENT

Policy Issue: The issue of stigma and discrimination towards those who live with mental illness within Canada continues to remain widespread and persistent.

Why Is This An Issue?: While public attitude towards some mental illnesses seems to be softening, documents from the Public Health Agency of Canada (2006) and the Mental Health Foundation (2006) continue to reveal that people who live with serious mental illness and addictions are routinely denied employment, access to health care, housing, insurance and mortgages. The issues are complex and have much to do with government's practices, policies and procedures of the mental health system. Stigma and discrimination towards those living with mental illness impacts almost every domain of an individual's life and continues to limit full citizenship and equal rights.

Components of the Issue: In the document "Mental Illness In Canada – An Overview", the Public Health Agency of Canada points out that "twenty percent of Canadians will personally experience a mental illness during their lifetime." Mental illness directly and indirectly affects all Canadians whether personally, or through illness in a family member, friend or colleague. Mental illness itself does not discriminate by age, education, social status, or culture. There is a complex interplay of biological and environmental factors that determine the causes of a mental illness, and as well it is also known that the onset of most mental illnesses occurs during adolescence and young adulthood. It is more difficult and frightening to try and understand a mental illness than a physical illness and this contributes to the stigma. The stigmatization becomes a serious barrier to individuals who may otherwise seek assistance early. Stigma is also internalized by individuals and this further complicates the process of healing and recovery.

Target Audience of the Policy: Everyone. Specifically, for this paper, mental health consumer/survivors, youth and children, service providers, the media, government systems from municipal to federal levels.

Brief Analysis: In the Mental Health Foundation's survey 'Pull Yourself Together! - A Survey of People's Experiences of Stigma and Discrimination as a Result of Mental Distress' evidence suggests that people experiencing mental distress are heavily discriminated against in society and often feel excluded. People talked about their fears of receiving a mental health diagnosis and being discriminated against. Many people found coming to terms with mental distress and diagnosis a long and difficult process. In the document from 'The Report on Mental Illness in Canada' from The Public Health Agency of Canada it states that "the serious stigma and discrimination attached to mental illnesses are among the most tragic realities facing people with mental illness in Canada." This document further states that "this is due to continued arising forms of superstition, lack of knowledge and empathy, old belief systems, and

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a tendency to fear and exclude people who are perceived as different.” “This results in stereotyping, fear, embarrassment, anger and avoidance behaviours which then forces people to remain quiet about their mental illnesses, often causing them to delay seeking health care, avoid following through with recommended treatment, as well as avoiding sharing their concerns with family, friends, co-workers, employers, health service providers and others in the community.” The Canadian Alliance for Mental Illness and Mental Health (CAMIMH) has identified combating the stigma of mental illness and preventing discrimination against people with mental illness as one of the most pressing priorities for improving the mental health of Canadians. Educating the public and the media about mental illness is a first step toward reducing the stigma and encouraging greater acceptance and understanding of mental illness. CAMIMH also states that the development and enforcement of policies that address discrimination and human rights violations needs to happen to provide a greater incentive for change. It is probable however, that even though there is Human Rights legislation in place across Canada, it may be about a lack of resources and advocacy supports and initiatives for mental health consumer/survivors to access to follow up on complaints in order to address issues of human rights abuses given that stigma and discrimination is so entrenched within society and in particular within the mental health system.

Recommendations: The CCAMHR advocate for and actively pursue collaboration with related partners in order to apply the following recommendations to address the issues of stigma and discrimination within the mental health consumer/survivor movement within Canada by:

- 1) Challenging the media portrayal of mental illness and people living with mental illness.
- 2) Develop educational initiatives and campaigns targeting the mental health community and the community at large which includes the schools and the workplace. The campaign needs to include increased outreach/back-up supports which seek to raise ongoing awareness of mental health and mental illness.
- 3) Provide accurate information about mental health and mental illness to General Practitioners and other service professionals including all levels of government services.
- 4) Provide increased funding to all Consumer/Survivor run organizations including Self-Help/Mutual Aid Networks in order to put in place Anti-Stigma Advocacy Programs which addresses all levels of advocacy work, which includes that of 1-1 and systemic advocacy especially including Human Rights abuses.
- 5) Provide increased funding for Crisis Response Systems/Psychiatric Emergency Services/Street Outreach Services/Community Outreach Programs and Case

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Management Programs in order that they may receive Anti-Stigma education training preferably delivered from local Consumer/Survivor run organizations.

Policy Statement: That the CCAMHR adopt a policy stating: All people living with a mental illness in Canada be allowed access to full citizenship and equal rights without stigma and discrimination.

Sources/Bibliography:

1) Public Health Agency of Canada – ‘A Report on Mental Illnesses in Canada’ August 2006

www.phac-aspc.gc.ca (Includes the CAMIMH statements)

2) The Mental Health Foundation – ‘Pull Yourself Together! – A Survey of People’s Experiences of Stigma and Discrimination’ August 2006 www.mentalhealth.org.uk



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