

## SMRC Volunteer Focus Group Summary

April 2014

### Introduction

This is a summary report of the findings obtained from a focus group completed in March 2014 with four volunteers participating in various aspects of Southern Minnesota Recovery Connection (SMRC). The report discusses major themes from the focus group discussion with regard to aspects of volunteering that are most satisfying and challenging, suggestions for improvement of the volunteer experience, and the volunteers' perspectives on the impact of SMRC in the recovery community.

### Volunteering role and tenure with SMRC

Two of the volunteers who participated in the focus group provide SMRC clients with peer support through the Telephone Recovery Support (TRS) program, one volunteer serves as a Recovery Coach, and one helps with administrative or event tasks. Volunteering tenures ranged from a couple of months to over two years.

### Most satisfying part of volunteering with SMRC

Participants were asked what was most satisfying about volunteering with SMRC. All four participants feel that helping and supporting other people is most satisfying. In addition, two participants appreciate that they are learning more about different pathways to recovery through their work with SMRC. Finally, one respondent each feels it is rewarding to be part of something "bigger" in the recovery community and volunteering helps to support his/her own recovery.

### Most challenging part of volunteering with SMRC

When asked what was challenging about volunteering with SMRC, the primary challenge mentioned is working with people with addictions during difficult times in their lives. Some respondents identified that this is a particularly difficult group of people to work with, especially as volunteers. Recoverees may be resistant to the support at times, by not answering

calls or hanging up on the volunteers, and they may be dealing with crises that are beyond the scope of peer-support services, both of which can be frustrating to volunteers. In addition, one TRS volunteer feels that it can be more challenging to connect with people by phone than it would be in-person because you are unable to read their non-verbal communication.

Another challenge the volunteers identified is that there are always so many activities going on at SMRC, they wish they had more time to engage in them all. They would like to help more, but they have other demands on their time as well. These volunteers emphasized that SMRC staff are very understanding when they are unable to volunteer more, but they personally wish they had more to offer.

### Feedback on volunteer trainings

Volunteers feel that the TRS training was adequate, overall, and it prepared them to provide telephone support, particularly with the database and online resources for referrals. The TRS volunteers agreed that the training was good, but their hands-on experience has been particularly helpful for getting familiar with the resources that are available for recoverees. One participant would like to learn more about the recovery resources (beyond SMRC) available, especially in surrounding communities, in order to better assist to recoverees during calls or Recovery Coaching sessions.

The Recovery Coach volunteer strongly felt that the Recovery Coach training was helpful. This volunteer really enjoyed the hands-on practice offered during the training, as well as the information about maintaining boundaries with recoverees. S/he also felt that the training would be informative and accessible for people not in recovery, who could learn a lot about recovery from the training. The two TRS volunteers said that they thought the Recovery Coaching training sounded like it would be helpful to them in their role as well.

## Suggested improvements

When asked how the volunteer experience at SMRC could be improved, participants focused primarily on how they could expand to serve more recoverees. Volunteers believe that SMRC's space could be more functional if there were more private spaces, a larger open space, and more noise control in each space. They feel that there has been a great deal of interest in using the space, so they could provide more support and more confidential support if the space was more conducive to it.

Some volunteers would like to see more people engaging in SMRC activities. They appreciate that the activities are frequent, open, and optional, but they believe that there are other people who could benefit from the activities that are not currently engaged.

Tying these two suggestions together, a couple of respondents thought it would be ideal if SMRC could provide more recreational space, such as pool or other games. They felt that this would be a draw because these games would allow people to have a sober social way to congregate with less formality. This would increase recoverees' comfort with the organization, and it would build a more cohesive community.

## SMRC's impact on the recovery community

The volunteers were also asked for their perspective on how SMRC has affected the recovery community.

Volunteers agree that SMRC is a welcoming, accessible place for recoverees and volunteers. Anyone can walk into SMRC and they will be accepted. In addition, they feel that SMRC staff show a sincere interest in getting to know the people they work with, including both recoverees seeking support and volunteers. They also ask for input from

volunteers and recoverees about SMRC's activities to ensure that they are as appealing and accessible to the recovery community as possible.

In addition, the volunteers feel that SMRC has contributed to helping many recoverees in the community. One volunteer remembers a volunteer saying "you make my week so much easier when you call." The volunteers also think it's beneficial that SMRC continue to support recoverees for as long as they need. Some organizations only provide support for a defined period of time, but SMRC will keep checking on recoverees for years after their recovery date just to make sure they are doing okay. One volunteer reflected on the close relationships that SMRC has helped to foster, saying "You meet a lot of people. You learn from each other. You always keep it positive. You become almost like family."

Finally, the volunteers felt that SMRC is making an impact on the broader recovery community. They are changing the face of recovery and making it positive. They try to reduce stigma by promoting the idea that recovery can be fun and recoverees can do positive things. They are making recovery visible. One volunteer reported being proud to be part of the changes SMRC is making. Another volunteer appreciates the work SMRC is doing to break down siloes in recovery. This volunteer would like to eventually see SMRC as a "hub" of recovery programming and efforts in their area.

The volunteers all agree that the strengths of SMRC really come down to the staff. They feel that the staff make SMRC what it is. One volunteer said "this place could have the same message that it currently has, but the people that run this place are really what make it, because all three of them believe in what this place stands for."

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