

Navigating and Advocating

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What happens when a person with a mental illness is brought to the emergency room but is unable to communicate their medical symptoms? What is the response of medical personnel when a patient is known to have a psychiatric diagnosis? Barriers to effective, sometimes lifesaving medical attention exist not only because of impaired communication that may be related to a mental illness but also because of the medical staff's response to the patient. In either case, the crisis worker may find it necessary to advocate on behalf of their client. This workshop will use case scenarios to guide participants through an exploration of the barriers that exist for persons who have mental illness and who require medical attention. Participants will have the opportunity to integrate and share their own experiences. Although it is not the crisis worker's role to assess medical symptoms they should recognize symptoms that may need medical assessment and attention. Tactics for approaching medical personnel will be discussed.

The types of barriers that may be a result of patient illness related characteristics may include: impaired judgment and perceptions, impaired or inability to communicate, behavioral manifestations of symptoms of paranoid delusions, hostility, suicidal thoughts, decreased self care, difficulty following through with securing and maintaining adequate outpatient health care. Stressed or overburdened social support networks, financial problems, legal problems and problems related to housing may also impact access to medical care.

The types of barriers that may be related to health care provider systems may include: Inadequate training of medical personnel, patient history of receiving care, individual attitudes toward persons who have mental illness, medical personnel discomfort with caring for persons with mental illness, and a system that is not conducive to thorough or sensitive assessment for example time constraints. In some areas, patient resources are limited in as much as if a facility provides psychiatric care, they do not provide some more serious medical care and if a facility provides medical care, they do not provide psychiatric care.

The aim of this workshop is to generate ideas of how to work with medical professionals, navigate medical service systems and advocate on behalf of clients when necessary. Having a mental illness can make a person vulnerable and when medical care is needed for physical illness or injury, obstacles that prevent prompt and adequate medical treatment prolong suffering and endanger life and health. Crisis workers need to be alert to these issues so as to take appropriate steps to assure optimal treatment for persons who have mental illness.