



STATEMENT OF CONSUMER PRINCIPLES FOR A MENTALLY HEALTHY COMMUNITY

(October 2006)

ACT MENTAL HEALTH CONSUMER NETWORK INC.

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Introduction

Many people will experience mental illness at some time in their life. For some people, it will be an isolated event. For others, it will be a recurring experience over their lifetime. In all cases, people have lives beyond their mental illness.

Our society's treatment of people with an experience of mental illness has often been, and often still is, shameful. Many people have been and still are, effectively excluded from the social and economic life of our community. Many people have been and still are, stigmatised and discriminated against on a daily basis. Many people with a mental illness are denied the basic rights and protections of citizenship. The law has often been a central tool in this oppression.

In the ACT, the *ACT Mental Health (Treatment and Care) Act 1994*, underpins a policy and service provision framework which relies heavily on the use of coercion and control, without due regard to safeguarding the human rights of people with mental illness, and without seeing the exercise of such powers as a last resort. Network members express a concern that Mental Health ACT services, particularly acute services, see the use of "negative powers", those associated with involuntary detention and treatment, the use of seclusion and physical and chemical restraint, as the normal way to do much of its business¹. Network members express a concern that heavy reliance on these negative powers for day-to-day business encourages Mental Health ACT services to be structured around crisis management, rather than prevention and recovery². Network members perceive this emphasis as explaining, for example, the "prisoner like" processing of persons admitted to the Psychiatric Services Unit, resulting in further and unnecessary trauma for people experiencing a psychotic episode.

The current review of the *ACT Mental Health (Treatment and Care) Act 1994* offers the ACT community an opportunity to change the law to reflect a new way of thinking and acting in relation to mental health. Of course, reforming the law is only the beginning of the changes that are needed. However, it is an important symbolic and practical step that can provide a better foundation for mental health services in the ACT. Along with the implementation of the *ACT Human Rights Act 2004*, people with experience of mental illness see new legislation as an important starting point for real change.

As people with experience of mental illness, the ACT Mental Health Consumer Network (the Network) believes a new philosophy and approach is needed to turn the rhetoric of past decades into real achievements. We want a mentally healthy

¹ Network members also note with dismay that such practices are not evidence based. That is, for example, the use of seclusion and restraint are reported in the literature as overwhelmingly harmful, no-best practice, interventions.

² Such an emphasis is inconsistent with the guiding principles for the National Standards for Mental Health Services (1996).

community which welcomes people with experience of mental illness as valued and participating members in the economic and social life of our society.

A positive approach to mental health in our community

The ACT Mental Health Consumer Network, as people with experience of mental illness, calls for a positive approach to mental health in our community. This must be reflected in the design of services to meet our needs and in any legislation that affects our lives.

To this end, we claim our rights to:

- participate in the social and economic life of our community, to the extent that we choose.
- access health, housing and other support services to improve and maintain our mental health.
- work in partnership with health care providers to develop treatment regimes and services which suit our needs and to participate in decision-making throughout any illness.
- help shape a better future for ourselves, according to our own individual needs and our shared experiences of mental illness.

New mental health legislation and the policies and services which support the achievement of its purpose and objectives must:

- Help to create a community where mental health is maximised;
- Ensure services and supports are available to reduce the incidence and duration of mental illness; and
- Protect the human rights and rights of citizenship of anyone with a mental illness.

Drawing on the best aims from earlier reform efforts and building on the deep understanding of our own experiences as consumers, the Network outlines its *Consumer Principles For A Mentally Healthy Community*.

We believe these principles will guide the creation of a better, more inclusive future for people with experience of mental illness and for those who may, one day, have such experience.

Implementation of this statement will require strong government and community commitment and action within a solid framework of legal rights and responsibilities to ensure real and sustainable change.

ACT MENTAL HEALTH CONSUMER NETWORK INC.

Statement of consumer principles for a mentally healthy community

People with experience of mental illness are respected citizens³ of our community and valued contributors to the economic, social, cultural and creative life of the ACT.

The mental health of all people is a shared community concern and priority.

The legislative and policy framework of our society must endorse and support the full participation and human rights of people with experience of mental illness, eliminate discrimination, and ensure their right to the broad range of services and natural supports needed to improve and maintain their mental health.

Services must:

- Promote and support independence and recovery
- Enhance and develop each person's power and capability to control and direct their own lives
- Acknowledge each person's right to access assistance when needed
- Be available early, when needed or asked for
- Care for and nurture each person as an individual, with unique history, relationships, needs and aspirations
- Maintain and enhance each person's family relationships and their connection to the community
- Promote educated acceptance and a positive view in the community of people who experience mental illness
- Seek to protect people who experience mental illness from stigmatization and discrimination within the community
- Be sensitive to and responsive to cultural difference
- Be provided in the least restrictive and invasive way possible
- Build the foundation for constructive therapeutic relationships based on trust
- Provide a safe environment for people experiencing mental illness
- Eliminate additional fear and trauma created by service delivery practices
- Provide each person with the information they need to understand and make informed decisions about their mental health
- Work collaboratively with each person to prevent and prepare in advance for any potential mental health crisis
- Reference and utilise evidence based practice

³ When we use the word "citizen", it is not intended to exclude those who have yet to formally take up citizenship in our community or those who have arrived, for example as refugees. We believe the rights and protections of citizenship should apply to all people living in our community, whatever their legal status.