

Road to recovery

Rose Baxter, from Addiction Recovery Agency's relapse prevention service in Bristol, explains how they involve potentially hard-to-reach clients

In late 2002 the Addiction Recovery Agency (ARA), a charitable organisation providing 12-Step abstinence and harm reduction services to substance misuse clients, secured three years' funding for a new joint venture with two other agencies from the Bristol Drug Strategy Team. The relapse prevention service (RPS) is a free service to anyone over 18, living in Bristol and abstinent, who needs help & support to maintain their recovery.

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In January 2003 I started work on the project - based in our own building in Old Market. This was a new venture for me and at the top of my list of things to do were: how do we reach the community clients? How do we know what other services to provide?

We already had a leaflet outlining our services (groups, one to ones, training/education and weekly support). The next four months were spent 'walking the streets', visiting agencies, doctors surgeries and many other potential referral sources, and on the phone inviting people to visit us and getting the word out at fellowship meetings (Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous etc). By June the clients were arriving, so it was now a question of, what other services do we provide? Posters went up and letters were sent out - asking clients to attend the first Client Advisory Group meeting.

Eight clients attended and the ideas came flooding in. Among them were workshops on acupuncture, meditation

and parenting skills; a volunteering scheme; an information pack and more notice boards advertising events going on at the centre, and more. The group decided to meet thrice monthly.

In an effort to try and attract more members a newsletter was produced and sent to 87 clients. At the next meeting we had six members! But it's not about the numbers of clients that attend service user meetings. It's about looking after the group of people that turn up regularly. Social events started to happen, including meals, cinema and ice skating, and ARA was happy to pay.

It was that core group of people that continued to meet regularly over the next two years (others came and went), offering up new ideas that were also implemented. These included: new resources (recovery videos and tapes that can be hired); fun and leisure activities, and finding ways of getting clients together for group activities. The clients pay for the hire of the equipment or outdoor activities like kayaking, rock climbing or mountain biking.

The newsletter turned into a professional publication called *The Abstainer*. ARA paid for members to attend desktop publishing lessons at a local community centre so that they could design the finished product themselves. There was a *recovery horoscope* and a word search puzzle - but more importantly there were articles from clients offering hope, strength and experience to the clients we were yet to reach. The second edition of *The Abstainer* was published in August 2004.

In May 2004 the first meeting of the service users' forum was held in Bristol, steered by Bristol Community Safety & Drugs Partnership. It brought together current and former service users from

all local drug treatment agencies. We have always encouraged clients to attend the monthly meetings and they in turn attend the Client Action Team (CAT) meetings from time to time - updating them on what is happening in the community.

“When I joined the CAT team it was primarily to do some work on the newsletter but since then I have got a lot out of being there - to express my views about ARA and hopefully be a part of making some changes for the better.”

Terry, service user

It has not always been about successes and achievements. We are continually looking at how to reach clients who are not able to access our services. Promotion plays a huge part in how we reach community clients. Contacts at agencies and other organisations in this field change frequently so we have to promote our services regularly - that's how it works!

We currently have a new team - two of the original core members plus six current clients - that meets every month. At the last meeting it was decided that a representative attend ARA's internal management meeting to raise the issues that had come up at their meeting. There was a lot of positive discussion, including feedback regarding the possibility of running an extra group at our centre.

■ Sources

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