

## **Office of Consumers Affairs:**

### **A Pathway to Effective Public Mental Health Services**

#### **Executive Summary**

*Offices of Consumer Affairs: A Pathway to Effective Public Mental Health Services* is designed to encourage state mental health agencies to consider establishing an Office of Consumer Affairs as a mechanism to help ensure that consumers have a strong voice in state mental health policy development, planning and practice. The manual provides information on implementation practices, staffing issues, key responsibilities, consumer issues and hiring practices that have developed since the first Offices of Consumer Affairs were established in the late 1980's and early 1990's.

The National Association of Consumer/Survivor Mental Health Administrators (NAC/SMHA) was founded in 1993 to represent state mental health agency senior managers who are current or former recipients of mental health services. NAC/SMHA members work closely with the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors (NASMHPD) and its National Technical Assistance Center for State Mental Health Planning (NTAC) on a variety of issues and initiatives. In addition NAC/SMHA serves as the primary vehicle for networking and peer support among directors of Offices of Consumer Affairs throughout the nation and has committed itself to expanding the participation of consumers/survivors/ex-patients in all aspects of public mental systems. NAC/SMHA offers technical assistance to state mental health agencies that wish to develop a state Office of Consumers Affairs.

This manual represents a collaborative effort by NAC/SMHA, NTAC and NASMHPD to gather and synthesize the best practices and knowledge that have been developed to date on establishing and staffing Offices of Consumer Affairs. It can serve as a guide for state mental health agencies in creating an Office of Consumer Affairs, a technical assistance tool to acclimate new OCA directors and staff, and as a resource for helping state mental health agencies and Offices of Consumer Affairs to evaluate progress in achieving the office's short- and long-term goals.

In developing this manual, the authors and collaborators sought the expertise of directors of Offices of Consumer Affairs around the country; reviewed the literature on this subject, as well as on individual topics addressed herein; and developed a bibliography to complement the information presented in the manual. Thus this manual contains the most current and comprehensive information available on establishing and operating a state Office of Consumer Affairs.

The information in this manual is presented in three parts: Part I, "What Is an Office of Consumer Affairs?," draws on the expertise of current OCA directors throughout the country to discuss the primary responsibilities of the office and key issues on the consumer agenda. Part II summarizes the "Core Principles of a Successful Office of Consumer Affairs" developed by participants at NAC/SMHA's first national conference on establishing Offices of Consumer Affairs in 1995. Part III, "Selecting a Director of the Office of Consumer Affairs" describes effective practices that states have utilized in selecting an OCA director. The manual concludes with a bibliography on Offices of Consumer Affairs and, more generally, on consumer issues.