

## IV. Member Employment Opportunities

### **1. A Central Commitment to Member Employment**

From its inception, the Community Model has emphasized the value of providing members employment opportunities in *all* of its programs, administrative departments and support activities. This commitment to member employment has extended beyond program positions and led to the creation of a number of small business ventures operated entirely by members.

Lamp Community staff positions and Member-Operated Businesses achieve a number of important program objectives. They:

- acclimate members to a working environment without the high pressure
- provide members with opportunities to improve their job skills and work habits
- improve member functioning and socialization
- restore members' sense of purpose
- increase members' income
- reduce program salary costs
- meet the needs of members and other low-income and homeless neighborhood residents.

The commitment to member employment can be a challenge to implement. Supervising members as full and part-time employees takes a significant amount of the Community Model staff's energy, creativity and flexibility. It requires all of the Lamp Community to struggle with commonly held assumptions about disability, power, professionalism, formal education and recovery. The reward, however, is substantial: a stronger, more effective organization that boasts a marvelous diversity of people rich in life experience.

### **2. Positions Available within the Community Model**

At present, 48% of all paid positions at Lamp Community are held by current and former members, all of whom are persons diagnosed with a serious mental illness. The jobs fall under one of two main categories: 1) employment opportunities within the Community Model program and 2) positions in businesses operated by members.

1. **Member Employment Opportunities** – Members and former members are regularly hired into paid full-time and part-time positions within the Community Model's many programs and support activities. These include:

- Front desk positions
- Administrative office support
- Maintenance

- Housekeeping
- Kitchen employment
- And other support positions within the organization.

But the Community Model's focus on member employment goes far beyond opening up a few token positions on the support staff to members. Members and former members are integrated into all clinical activities as well. Lamp Community provides training and support to allow members to work as full-time and part-time employees receiving salaries and stipends in positions such as:

- Escorts
- Peer Advocates
- Advocates
- Mentors
- And in some instances, positions in Management.

2. **Member-Operated Businesses** benefit both members and the neighborhood, creating and reinforcing a sense of community on Skid Row. Many types of Member-Operated Businesses can be developed within the Community Model. Lamp Community has had particular success with the following:

- **Linen Service** – Lamp Community operates a commercial laundry that provides linen services to local non-profit residential hotels, shelters and other businesses. All the linen is machine laundered and pressed and folded by hand. Currently, the business employs 20 members in full and part-time positions.
- **Public Showers/Toilets** – Lamp Community operates public showers and toilets, providing full-time employment to two members.
- **Laundromat** – Lamp Community manages the only coin-operated laundromat in the Skid Row area. It employs three members in full-time positions.
- **Other businesses** – Less successfully, Lamp Community operated a grocery on Skid Row for many years. Other possible business opportunities (depending on the locations available to the program) include messenger services, copy shops and coffee stands.

### ***3. Maintaining the Financial Viability of Member-Operated Businesses***

The income of the Member-Operated Businesses varies. The linen service and the laundromat almost break even; the others operate at a small loss. Shortfalls are made up with a Community Development Block Grant award of \$59,000 per year.

The businesses were not always on such sound financial footing, however. Established in 1990 to expand and diversify agency revenue and job opportunities, the businesses were initially operated like charities rather than for-profit enterprises. As a result, business

decisions would be made that increased employment and benefited members, but lost substantial amounts of money.

For example, Lamp Community's experiment operating a small grocery market ended after two years. There was, and continues to be, a need for a clean, safe and affordable outlet for packaged goods, deli foods and cigarettes. The few stores that exist in the neighborhood mostly traffic in liquor and drug paraphernalia. But the store's poor customer base rarely bought much more than two aspirins and a soda in any one purchase. Store income was minimal and not enough to justify the small number of jobs it generated.

Lamp Community's linen service provides a cautionary tale with a more positive conclusion. In 1997, after seven years of operation, the linen service was losing \$4,000 a month, a significant deficit for a frugal agency like Lamp Community. The business was failing because Lamp Community expected customers to contract with the service merely because it was a good cause. The poor revenues that resulted made it difficult to replace linens that were fraying or turning gray. Overused machines broke down and caused delays. Customers noticed and complained, or worse, took their business elsewhere.

Losing money and business, Lamp Community management finally decided to close down the service for a few months to review ways it could be made viable. With the assistance and expertise of a consultant, the Executive Service Corporation, Lamp fashioned a practical plan to reopen the linen service with a more realistic business plan. The California Community Foundation pitched in \$100,000 to replace some equipment and inventory, and in late 1997, the Linen Service was back in action.

It took some time to achieve profitability, however. Lamp Community had given customers only one week notice before shutting down, leaving them to scramble for alternative services. They were wary of depending on Lamp Community again. Eventually, the linen service was able to land two major contracts that guaranteed a minimum monthly income that ensured the stability of the business. By turning to outside resources familiar with developing business plans and operating for-profit concerns, Lamp Community's businesses were able to become viable companies in their own right.

#### ***4. Challenges and Issues Related to Member Employment***

Members must observe work rules; shirking duties and substance use are not tolerated in the workplace. However, these employment opportunities provide a great deal of flexibility to members who are not yet ready to work in more demanding jobs. Members and their advocates work with business directors to determine the workloads and schedules that will give them the best opportunity to succeed. Mistakes, absences, lateness and other issues are addressed in a supportive manner.

Providers that expand employment opportunities for the people they serve face many unique challenges and issues. Most of these are directly related to the demanding

transition members face when they become an employee for the organization that has been their service provider.

During this transition, the member-employee must:

- become an employee providing services and support in the same places where he or she was recently a recipient of these services and support.
- develop peer relationships with agency employees who may have recently delivered services to him
- sometimes limit old peer relations
- observe confidentiality policies and understand unfamiliar business ethics
- build basic work skills and habits
- manage the financial consequences of employment, including a probable reduction in benefits, a possible change in eligibility for entitlements, withholdings for child support and a new responsibility for health care costs.

## ***5. Integrating Members with Professional Staff***

For the organization, the biggest challenge is integrating member-employees with personnel who are more educated and professionally trained. It can be a clash of cultures. In many cases, “professional” employees have a difficult time accepting that persons who have learned from life experience rather than organized schooling can – and should – be hired to equivalent positions and paid competitive wages for similar work.

The assumptions and biases of professional employees rarely interfere with their ability to work with members. But it is not uncommon for professional employees to have difficulty building effective relationships and working as a team with people they used to serve. The informal and intuitive, but sometimes disorganized, care offered by former members can conflict with the clinical, educated but occasionally regimented care of the professionally trained. Skilled supervisory staff must constantly address both explicit and hidden conflicts between these two classes of employees. Organizations and employees must also know when to admit it is not working out: sometimes the Community Model is simply not the right fit for some professional employees, even when they could be assets in another, more traditional setting.

## ***6. Policies for Member Employment***

Some of the policies Lamp Community uses to clarify the role of member-employees include the following:

- Payment for some positions is identified as a stipend to prevent member-employees from losing access to entitlements.
- Member-employees are selected through a formal recruitment and interview process.
- Employed members regularly make decisions on program expansion and the selection of new member-employees.

- To avoid conflicts of interest, Lamp Community members are not employed in program components they recently utilized or in which they presently participate. For example, a member living in the Transitional Housing program may work at the Respite Shelter, but not at the Transitional Housing component.
- Current labor, minimum wage, and ADA laws are posted at each work site.
- Each employee is provided with a copy of the Lamp Community Personnel Policies handbook, and is required to sign a statement that he or she has read, understood and agreed to these policies.
- Each employee is given a written statement describing the title of his position, compensation and benefits, starting date and schedule of hours.
- Each employee is responsible for maintaining a time sheet or time clock card.

## **7. Member-Employee Hiring Process**

### **Recruitment - Lamp**

Community administrative staff regularly informs members about employment opportunities within the agency through postings at the Human Resources office. All members who meet the basic applicant criteria can apply for posted positions. At the same time, advocates are always on the lookout for opportunities to link members to jobs appropriate to their skill levels and interests. When considering members for employment as Peer Advocates, advocates look for members who demonstrate constructive

leadership, volunteer for tasks, assume additional responsibilities and invest their time in improving the Lamp Community.

#### **Basic Criteria for Potential Job Applicants**

For a Lamp Community member to be considered for employment, he or she must be:

- A member of Lamp Community
- Eighteen years of age or older
- Able to get along with others on the job
- Stably housed in shelter, transitional or independent housing
- Managing his/her physical and mental health
- Referred by his or her advocate
- A citizen or have legal status for employment
- *Voluntarily* applying for an employment position.

Before any application can be submitted for any job, the member's advocate must discuss the potential candidate with the member's Program Director to assess her appropriateness for the position. Their discussion of the member's strengths and weaknesses will be shared with the member. If the Program Director and Advocate agree that the member is appropriate for an open position, she is encouraged to apply.

**Application and Interview** - The applying member's advocate then completes a referral form and sends the member to the human resources department, where the member will complete an employment application. The human resources department forwards the application and interview packet to the Program Director seeking to fill the position. The applicant must be interviewed within two weeks. If the Program Director finds the candidate appropriate, the member will be interviewed by the members participating in

the support group appropriate to the position (for example, Front Desk Clerks or Peer Advocates). The support group participants then advise the Program Director whether they recommend or oppose the member's application.

The Program Director will then meet with the applicant within 72 hours of the Support Group interview. One of three outcomes is possible: 1) she is hired; 2) she is being considered and must complete additional steps and interviews to obtain a final decision; or 3) she will not be hired, in which case her application materials will be filed with the human resources department for future consideration.

#### **Sample Interview Questions for Peer Advocate Applicants**

- What do you want to accomplish as a Peer Advocate?
- How can you contribute to the Peer Advocacy Program?
- Describe the personal support system you have in place.
- What is the best thing about having a mental illness?
- What is the worst thing about having a mental illness?
- Describe a lesson you learned "the hard way."
- How do you feel about working for a woman?
- Describe the differences between mental illness and developmental disabilities?
- What do you think will be the easiest and the hardest things about being a Peer Advocate?

### **8. Ethics and Confidentiality Policies for Peer Advocates**

As both members and employees of Lamp Community, Peer Advocates face unique challenges regarding their past, current and future relations with members. To assist Peer Advocates to develop and maintain appropriate professional boundaries, Lamp has created a set of Ethics and Confidentiality Policies for people in the position.

Peer Advocates must of course follow all policies for regular employees, including the three most important:

- Staff may not begin or plan to begin sexual or romantic relationships with members.
- Staff may not lend or borrow money or valuables to or from members.
- Staff may not use illegal drugs.

Peer Advocates must also comply with policies specific to their position:

- Peer Advocates have full access to Lamp Community services except in instances where participation in groups or group activities could conflict with Lamp Community confidentiality policies.
- Peer Advocates can use staff's personal phone numbers for work-related business only; visits to non-member staff homes must also be work related.
- Peer Advocates will not establish new social relationships with any member receiving services or housing at a site where the Peer Advocate is employed.

- Social relationships with members at any Lamp Community site are strongly discouraged.
- Peer Advocates can maintain relationships with members that were established prior to their employment as Peer Advocates.

## **9. Sustaining Member Employment**

Once a member is employed within Lamp Community, the agency offers supportive services to help the member sustain his or her employment and advance when possible and appropriate. Lamp Community provides the following supports:

- Like all employees, member-employees must attend extensive, interactive orientations and training in ethics, professionalism, member/employee boundaries, case management, suicide and violence prevention, crisis intervention and other issues.
- Lamp Community's Member Services Department provides weekly support groups to employees with similar job descriptions (front desk clerks, peer advocates, etc.). Participants who work five hours or more a week are paid for the time they attend the groups.
- For all employees working 30 or more hours a week, Lamp sustains both in-house and off-site Employee Assistance Programs that provide recovery support and individual counseling on issues related to employment.
- Each member-employee is assigned an in-house Job Coach/Mentor to assist and support her in her employment.
- Each member-employee continues to have access to an advocate to assist him with social services, housing, healthcare and recovery.

### **The Job Mentor and Weekly Support Group**

Once hired, new Peer Advocates are assigned to a Mentor for the first year of employment. The Mentor facilitates the Peer Advocate Support Group. The goals of the Support Group are to:

- Provide a safe space in which Peer Advocates can express themselves emotionally
- Help Peer Advocates support each other, reduce stress and reinforce stability
- Provide a forum for on-going in-service training
- Solve problems and develop new coping skills
- Clarify values and attitudes
- Strengthen the positive aspects of their work lives, and eliminate or compensate for the negative aspects
- Practice communication and advocacy skills
- Develop good organizational work habits
- Bond together as a group to establish a sense of camaraderie and celebration.

The Mentor is also responsible for:

- Meeting with the Peer Advocate a minimum of one hour each week
- Guiding and counseling the Peer Advocate in job related matters
- Ensuring that the Peer Advocate completes the three months of orientation and first year training activities
- Coordinating quarterly reviews of the Peer Advocate's job performance and employment support plan.

### **Orientation and Training**

As he begins employment, the Peer Advocate will meet with his Mentor and Program Director to write an orientation plan for his first three months on the job. The plan addresses:

1. Specific job responsibilities
2. What skill building and training activities the Peer Advocate will focus on
3. The schedule of counseling and support group activities the Peer Advocate will follow
4. The schedule of meetings with his Mentor
5. Other issues that need to be addressed by the Peer Advocate.

At the end of the first three months of employment, the Peer Advocate will meet with his Mentor and Program Director to review his performance, progress, career goals and future needs. If the Peer Advocate has satisfactorily met his employment obligations, the team will develop a plan for the next three months. This process is repeated every quarter in the first year.

From the second year on, the Program Director is responsible for supervision, evaluation, support, and training of the Peer Advocate. Typically, the Mentor is no longer directly involved in advising the Peer Advocate, although in some instances, the Mentor's support can be continued for the first three months of the second year.

### **Helping Peer Advocates Become Advocates**

Many of the most promising members are hired as Peer Advocates. They may remain in this position, but also have the eventual opportunity to become full-time Advocates. To facilitate this career growth, the Community Model provides clear guidelines and benchmarks for the Peer Advocate to follow and attain. Each Peer Advocate works with his Program Director to create a career plan with a timeline for developing new capacities and enhancing skills.

After a year as a Peer Advocate, the member-employee may apply to become a full-fledged Advocate. When hired as a Peer Advocate, the member-employee already met the basic requirements for employment in the Community Model (*see box*). To move up



and become an Advocate, the Peer Advocate must meet additional job requirements. He must be:

- Able to read and write English
- Computer literate
- Able and willing to work with men and women who have psychiatric and developmental disabilities
- Confident and have a strong sense of self. Good sense of humor is a plus.
- Able to cooperate and work effectively with people from various racial, ethnic, religious and economic backgrounds

The Peer Advocate must also take a number of steps to increase his independence from Lamp Community. The Peer Advocate must:

- Move to a permanent apartment that is not managed, owned or serviced by Lamp Community.
- Have a minimum of twelve consecutive months of clean and sober time (along with a demonstrated ability to manage prescribed drug use).
- Obtain counseling, mental health services and recovery support outside of Lamp Community.

