Rutherford County Mental Health Court: Occupational Therapy Program Development

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Agency

Two million people with mental illnesses are arrested every year, and the majority are not for violent crimes (NAMI, 2018). While incarcerated, 83% of offenders don’t receive the treatment they need, and those with mental illnesses are more likely to receive longer sentences than those without (NAMI, 2018). They also experience more reintegration difficulties upon their release (NIC, 2018).

Rutherford County Mental Health Court is a 1+ year diversion program which treats people who are incarcerated for non-violent crimes, have a severe and persistent mental illness, and in some cases, have a co-morbidity of a substance use disorder. The program acts as an alternative to imprisonment, and includes requirements/services such as:

- Case management
- Education on mental illness
- Randomized drug tests
- Education on coping mechanisms
- Court appearances
- Relapse prevention
- Symptom management skills

Needs of Agency

- Incorporation of Occupational Therapy Services into the Rutherford County Mental Health Court
- Comprehensive and organized information on the program for future Fieldwork Level II students
- Occupational therapist position to continue treatment with participants and maintain the new program long-term
- Equipment and funding for occupational therapy interventions and treatment
- Additional research should be done to establish the efficacy of occupational therapy in Mental Health Recovery Courts

Goals of the Experiential Component

- Develop an occupational therapy program which could be incorporated into the existing Mental Health Court Program infrastructure. It would focus on skills for successful community reintegration for participants, and could be used as a future template for similar programs in other courts
- Develop the Fieldwork Level II student position and create a Student Manual detailing the policies, procedures, and expectations for the occupational therapy student in this setting
- Design an occupational therapy program which is modifiable for the individual needs of participants and has the capacity to change with the program and its facilities
- Promote the integration of occupational therapy into the Mental Health Court program and treatment team by demonstrating positive improvement in participants and beneficial contributions to their care

Outcomes of the Experiential Component

As of today, one of the first Mental Health Courts in the country which incorporates occupational therapy is being utilized in Rutherford County. This program integrates occupational therapy into the current Mental Health Court Program to address necessary skills for community reintegration through one-on-one sessions and groups, including: emotional regulation, life skills, changing roles, effective communication, job skills, sensory awareness, and other individualized requests.

The program was formatted as a template that is adaptable for future changes. Components of this project included:

- Development of procedures for Occupational Therapy initial evaluations, groups, and discharge for all participants, as well as one-on-one sessions based on need
- Creation of specially designed educational materials and worksheets
- Development of occupational therapy program policies, documentation, and Fieldwork Level II student position and expectations
- Fieldwork Level II Student Manual
- Mental Health Graduation Coin design

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References