

PRISON LINK WORKERS

A high proportion of people in the criminal justice system have mental health problems, and often they do not get the support they need. Revolving Doors, a registered charity based in Clerkenwell, runs a scheme in which staff known as 'link workers' provide practical support people with mental health and multiple needs who come into contact with the criminal justice system at police stations, courts and prisons. In 2000, the King's Fund made a grant of £38,861, which went primarily towards the evaluation of the scheme.

Revolving Doors was established in 1993 to support people with mental health problems who are involved with the criminal justice system and who have 'fallen through the net' of mainstream services.

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Why was the project needed?

Revolving Doors set up its prison link worker scheme because of the number of people in contact with the criminal justice system who have mental health problems, and the difficulty that many experience in keeping in contact with housing, mental health, and other services. The overall aims of the scheme were to provide support and advice at police stations, courts and prisons, to link individuals back into mainstream services, and to work in the longer term with people with complex needs to improve their lives in the community.

Who were its clients?

The clients were in Wormwood Scrubs, Pentonville, Holloway and Woodhill prisons, and local police stations and courts. Ninety per cent were male. The ethnic mix was 63.1 per cent white, 18.4 per cent black, 13.2 per cent Asian, and 5.3 per cent mixed or other. As far as they could recall, less than half had had a previous mental health diagnosis. Their problems included distress or confusion, paranoid symptoms, and suicidal feelings. They had been detained for a wide range of – mostly minor – offences, including public nuisance, disorder and shoplifting. Twenty-two per cent had committed more than 100 offences by the age of 22 and one-third had been homeless between the ages of 16 and 18.

How did it work?

Practical support and policy development Over a three-year period, Revolving Doors ran practical schemes in police stations, prisons and courts to support people who had fallen through the net of mainstream services, and helped other agencies develop their own projects targeting similar clients. It also carried out research and policy work at local and national level, working in partnership with the police, health, housing, probation and social services.

Interviews, training and co-ordination Project workers conducted interviews with clients and practitioners, and with other project staff members. They gave basic training and seminars in mental health for police and prison officers, to help them make appropriate referrals to the schemes, and ran practitioner seminars to raise the scheme's profile and improve its work with other agencies. They also co-ordinated local advisory groups made up of health agencies, the police, probation, prison, housing, drug and alcohol agencies and voluntary groups, to monitor and advise on the operation.

Raising awareness Revolving Doors used some of the King's Fund grant to provide information to other agencies and the general public about the needs of people with mental health problems who are in contact with the criminal justice system, and how to improve their health and social care. It raised awareness about these issues through conferences and the media, including *Guardian Society*, *The Observer*, *Community Care*, the *Independent on Sunday*, *Prison Service Journal*, Radio 4's 'All in the Mind', and a special report on BBC1 LDN News.

I nearly ended up smashing up the social when I went down there last week – the woman walked in and said she was going to take me to court. I was getting angry, but Sara [link worker]... just being there helped me control my anger.

Client

With the whole-systems approach you feel you get to understand how a whole community works, rather than just part of it...

When we talk to decision makers, it feels like we're bringing clients to life for those who are normally removed from this side of things.

Project worker

User participation Revolving Doors has a user-involvement group, which meets fortnightly. The group publishes a newsletter, organises social events and provides panel members to take part in the agency's recruitment process. Its members, known as the 'Revolvers', are currently helping develop a scheme in which current and former clients visit prospective and new clients, to build trust and credibility. They are also working on a client satisfaction survey, which they conduct themselves, with support from staff.

What did it achieve?

Stable housing In a sample group of 101 clients, link workers helped 76 per cent gain stable housing following release from prison, and 24 per cent saw an improvement from their housing before they went to prison. Link workers arranged assessments for 'vulnerable' housing status for 31 per cent of clients. For all clients, their standard of housing was at least as good after they left prison as it had been before they went to prison.

Benefits payments Before going to prison, 99 per cent of clients were out of work. Despite this, 46 per cent were not receiving any benefits at all when they were referred to the schemes. Link workers helped 61 per cent of clients with benefits applications. They arranged appointments with a benefits agency officer for one-quarter of clients, and accompanied half of those to the appointment. They also secured £6,370 of benefits per week for a sample group of 99 clients.

Registration with GPs Thirty-four per cent of clients needed to see a GP but were not registered with one. Link workers registered 71 per cent of long-term clients with a GP. By the end of the project, more than 99 per cent of long-term clients had a GP – the same rate as that of the general UK population.

Mental health assessments Of those clients who could recall, 51 per cent had never had a mental health diagnosis before, and the same proportion had not had any previous contact with mental health services. Link workers arranged GP mental health assessments for 36 per cent of clients. This helped provide evidence to back up claims for benefits such as Disability Living Allowance and Incapacity Benefit.

Drug and alcohol support Forty-nine per cent of clients had a problem with drugs and 52 per cent with alcohol. Link workers arranged relevant treatment for 29 per cent of clients once they were in the community, and referred 15 per cent of clients in prison to drug services.

Lessons learnt

Effectiveness of the methods Assertive prison inreach and community outreach can have a positive impact on the health and well-being of people with mental problems who come into contact with the criminal justice system.

Collecting and disseminating data Project teams need to take their own internal dynamics into account, with help from outside consultants. Managers need to concentrate on monitoring standards and quality control rather than clinical supervision.

Caseload Teams must think carefully about which clients they can support on a long-term basis, and keep the size of their caseload manageable, evaluating each client on a case-by-case basis.

Useful resources

Snakes and Ladders – the full project evaluation report

Multi-Agency Review Framework and Service Directory – CD Rom-based information tool

Both available from Laura in the Revolving Doors partnership team, at: laura@revolving-doors.co.uk

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