

## BACKGROUND ON LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The Learning Community is a concept being developed by the National Council for Community Behavioral Health (National Council) and the National Resource Center on Integrated Healthcare to assist with improving quality and reducing the time it takes to implement change within an organization. Research has shown that it takes 17 years for practice methods that have been found to be effective with public consumers (i.e. been published by academicians) to reach the field. While there are a variety of explanations for this, it is imperative that the field find ways to speed up this process.

It is also imperative that the field find a way to more efficiently and effectively use consultants. The current model of individual consultants or teams of consultants to individual agencies across the country is not efficient or effective. Learning Communities are a way to provide group consultation and to leverage the existing expertise in a given area. Learning Communities can increase cost savings for participating organizations, provide more sustained consultation time (12-18 months vs. 1-6 months) and help member organization's learn from each other. These three factors lead to reducing the time for implementing new ideas by eliminating the "re-creation of the wheel", sharing successes between organizations and improving the collaboration between organizations.

Learning Communities are modeled about learning collaborative but modified to specifically fit behavioral health organizations. The Learning Community model is based on the following six steps.

**STEP 1: THE PROBLEM STATEMENT:** All Learning Communities start with a problem statement. The problem statement defines the issue, topic or area that will be the focus of the Learning Community. The problem statement provides the initial communication that will be used to recruit members for learning communities. Once the membership of the community has been defined, the problem statement can be more specifically tweaked to meet the needs of those participating.

**STEP 2: THE MISSION STATEMENT:** The Learning Community also creates a mission statement that will define the vision for what will be accomplished by the group. Having defined the problem, what will look different, in a global way, in each participating organization as a result of participating in a particular learning community? Final implementation varies based on local processes and procedures; however, the mission defines the outcome(s) that are to be achieved by all organizations participating in the learning community.

**STEP 3: TARGET POPULATIONS:** Each Learning Community defines the specific target population(s) to be addressed.

**STEP 4: LEARNING COMMUNITY GOALS:** Each learning community develops long term and specific goals, collectively, in the first meeting. The long term goals will generally be the consumer based outcomes that are expected to be achieved as a result of participation.

Specific agency-based goals are also determined and shared across learning community participants so that coaching and support can be provided at each meeting.

#### **STEP 5: LEARNING COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS:**

Each learning community has certain expectations for the organization(s) convening the group and for group participants. Some of the expectations will be consistent across all learning communities. For conveners of the process general expectations include to:

- Provide project management of the Collaborative
- Provide evidence-based information on subject matter, application of that subject matter, and methods for process improvement, both during and between Learning Sessions;
- Offer coaching to organizations; and
- Provide communication strategies to keep organizations connected to the faculty and to colleagues during the Learning Community.

General expectations of all participants include to:

- Perform pre-work activities to prepare for the Learning Session;
- Connect the goals of the Learning Community work to a strategic initiative in the organization;
- Provide a senior leader to serve as sponsor for the team, serve as champion for spread of the changes in practice within the systems, and attend at least the first learning session;
- Send a team to all Learning Sessions; Learning sessions may be in-person, on the phone or via teleconferencing. The decisions on how the sessions are provided will be decided in and by the learning community.
- Provide resources to support their team including resources necessary for Learning Sessions, time to devote to testing and implementing changes in the practice;
- Provide expert staff (Financial, Information System, Clinical Policy Development) to the team on an as needed basis;
- Perform tests of changes in the organization as a result of the Learning Community;
- Participate, in the second learning cycle by collecting agreed upon data for developing implementation manuals and fidelity instruments.
- Take part in regular LC evaluations (either mutual or as a group) to assess effectiveness.

#### **STEP 6: TOPIC AREAS FOR LEARNING COMMUNITY DISCUSSIONS:**

Each Learning Community identifies the key target areas that will be topics of discussion. Once the topic areas are defined, the group enters the real work of learning and working together to create effective, efficient and quality change in our organizations.