

# PEOPLE FIRST

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## Empty Shoe MEMORIAL

IN MEMORY OF THOSE LOST TO SUICIDE

GRANDPARENT

FATHER - MOTHER

SON - DAUGHTER

BROTHER - SISTER

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OMHSAS's statewide suicide prevention initiative is working to save lives by drilling down to the local level, with a special focus on youth and veterans.

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# New Initiative Helps Build Supported Education Efforts Around the State

By Elisa Ludwig

**W**ith undiagnosed bipolar disorder, Jimmy Members couldn't keep up with his college classes and missed them for weeks at a time.

When he lost his scholarship, he dropped out of West Chester University. Twenty-five years later, with the help of supported education, he is back in school at Community College of Philadelphia.

"I always wanted to go back to school, but I was afraid that, with the stress and my depression, I wouldn't be able to manage it," Members said. "I didn't have a problem finding a job over the years without a degree, but I was never able to start a career."

Career opportunity is an integral component of the recovery process, but many people with serious mental illnesses miss out on the chance to go to college and prepare properly for the working world. Supported education, a set of services to help place and keep individuals in post-secondary schools, is widely thought to be an important tool in the fight to help consumers stay on the path to recovery.

Now the Pennsylvania Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services is working to disseminate the supported education model around the state.

"Supported education for people with mental illness basically came out of the psychiatric rehabilitation movement. If you're talking about people recovering and living their life in the community, education has to be an important part of that," said Arlene Solomon, director of employment services at Horizon House in Philadelphia.

Supported education calls for specialized staff to help students plan their educational program in an integrated setting. (In earlier models, people with mental illnesses often received job training or higher education in segregated classrooms.) Specialists provide career supports, financial aid assistance, help with mental health services, information on rights and resources, mentoring, tutoring, and other academic help.

## Research Shows Promise

To date, the research on the effectiveness of supported education shows promising results, though evidence is still emerging. The Boston University (BU) Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation has conducted a systematic re-

*Supported education is widely thought to be an important tool in the fight to help consumers stay on the path to recovery.*

view of the research on supported education over the past 20 years and found preliminary evidence suggesting that supported education can make a difference in helping individuals with psychiatric disabilities reach their educational goals. Based on this initial review, experts believe that the right supports can help – and that, with further research on supported education services, there will be more funding and advocacy to promote such efforts around the country.

"Though these aren't randomized controlled trials, the literature is so promising that the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) is planning to adopt supported education as an evidence-based practice," said Dr. Mark Salzer, director of the University of Pennsylvania Collaborative on Community Integration of Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities.

Because its review of the literature found a lack of rigorous evidence indicating that supported education results in more individuals with psychiatric disabilities earning advanced degrees or certificates, or that it leads to higher employment rates, the Supported Education Study Group at the BU Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation

has called for additional research on the effectiveness of supported education models. Salzer is currently conducting a two-year controlled randomized study of supported education in New Jersey in partnership with the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. "In the mean-

time, we know that supported housing, supported employment and supported socialization are effective, so the technology underlying supported education – providing supports – is effective."

## Few Formal Programs

In Pennsylvania, there are few formal programs devoted to supported education. Horizon House's Education Plus program, which began in January 2002 with funding from The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health, is

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## “If you’re talking about people recovering and living their life in the community, education has to be an important part of that.”

widely considered the state leader and is one of the largest supported education programs in the country. Fashioned on SAMHSA’s best practices model, Education Plus follows a mobile support model, operating onsite at schools rather than from a mental health services agency.

### Someone They Can Count On

“We liken our educational specialists to educational case managers,” Solomon said. “They help students deal with any issues that may pose a challenge to remaining in school and being successful. Some of the biggest issues we see are time management and self-esteem, as many students have had a prior negative experience in school and feel fearful. They need someone they can count on who will be there when their anxiety acts up.”

Education Plus specialists remain in biweekly contact with the 55 students they serve every semester, though that contact may increase around exam or class registration time. Collectively, students attend 14 schools and certificate programs in the region, including Temple University, Drexel University and St. Joseph’s University; and some are in graduate programs. Solomon said Education Plus is trying to reach out to more trade and technical schools as well.

Much of the assistance the program provides is logistical. Specialists

can help point students toward the college’s Office of Disabilities for special accommodations (longer test-taking time, for example); psychiatric services; or welfare or housing resources. “If a student calls and says, ‘I got a bad grade on a test and I want to drop this class,’ we will counsel them about all of their options. Dropping the class might affect their financial aid, for example. If a student is hospitalized in the middle of a semester, we will make sure someone on staff meets with their instructor and gets their assignments so the student can still complete their work,” Solomon said.

### Statewide Replication

Soon, the Education Plus model will be replicated around the state. With new funding from a Medicaid Infrastructure Grant, Horizon House is providing technical assistance to several counties for the development of supported education projects.

## “She was struggling with her classes and ready to drop out. We worked with her and she graduated with honors.”

“We’ve been setting up cross-disability collaboratives in Erie, Wilkes-Barre and Harrisburg, and doing trainings around the state, in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, State College, Johnstown and Scranton. We’re

thankful that OMHSAS has been very supportive of this work and has provided additional funding,” Solomon said. The organization’s efforts have also been supported by those who head cross-disability offices and organizations, including Ed Butler, executive director of the Governor’s Cabinet and Advisory Committee for People with Disabilities, and Gene Bianco, president and CEO of the Pennsylvania Association of Rehabilitation Facilities (PARF).

At this writing, a one-day symposium is planned for June 24, 2010, in Harrisburg, at which Solomon and other speakers will be sharing lessons learned, while a panel of students will speak about their own experiences with supported education. Education Plus is also putting together a guide for providers to help students connect with the right resources.

“The goal is to bring stakeholders together and create collaboratives that are self-sustaining so they can continue to work toward this model without necessarily establishing a formal program,” said Emily McNair, manager of communications and development at Horizon House.

The good news is that supported education does not necessarily need a dedicated program. Services can be established in existing institutions

and agencies simply by making links and connections. “There are many things people can do without setting up a formal supported education program,” Solomon said. “Existing

case managers can devote a portion of their time to supports for education. It doesn’t necessarily have to cost a lot of money – it’s really about changing the culture and setting goals for education and employment.”



### Education Plus graduation and end-of-year celebration at CCP in May 2009

Salzer has found that Education Plus students stayed in more than 90 percent of the classes they signed up for and had a GPA of 3.1, both of which reflected a significantly better performance than that of the general student population.

Solomon said she's continually seeing success stories. One woman was referred to Education Plus from the Office of Disabilities at Community College of Philadelphia. "She was struggling with her classes and ready to drop out. We worked with her and she graduated with honors and then

got a full scholarship to a four-year college, where she studied psychology and was very successful."

Jimmy Members is deep into his second year, attending school full time and majoring in behavioral health. He's also an officer of the Behavioral Health Club on campus. He plans to work with at-risk youth after graduating.

"One of the major challenges was

dealing with my insecurity about measuring up to college standards," he said. "I also had to learn to write my papers on computers – they weren't around when I was in college last time. But having the support along the way, having someone who really understands what I'm going through, has been great. I would have never imagined this would be possible, and it's been an awesome ride."

*Boston University's literature review of supported education can be found at <http://drrk.bu.edu/research-syntheses/psychiatric-disabilities/supported-education>*

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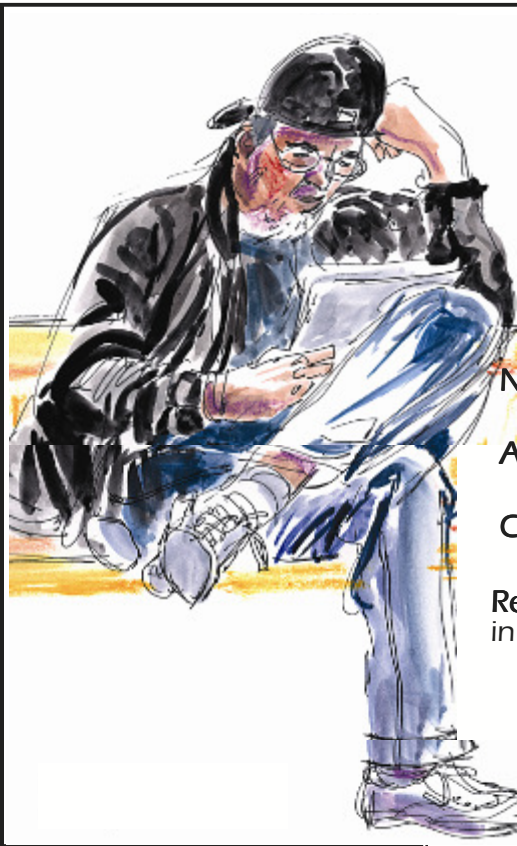
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