The Los Angeles County Process Improvement Pilot Project

Change Story for Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center, Via Avanta

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Agency Change Project Highlights

The following information was extracted from a variety of sources, including presentations given at the September 22, 2006 completion conference, site visit summary notes, monthly Change Leader conference call minutes, and monthly change project reporting forms/client tracking worksheets. The highlights are organized in alphabetical order, by agency name.

Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center, Via Avanta

Via Avanta (the only residential treatment program included in the pilot project) provides treatment to women with children under the age of 5. The program staff utilizes a therapeutic community model. At any given time, there are approximately 40 residents (as well as 15 children under the age of 5). The average length of stay is roughly six months (180 days). The program is located in Pacoima.

The key engagement and retention issues were identified through a variety of methods, including an agency walk-through (conducted by Holly McCravey, Change Leader), baseline data collection, and focus groups with clients who were in treatment for less than 60 days.

Baseline Data
According to baseline data collected during the time period of December 2005 to February 2006, 44% of clients were discharged early (that is, within the first 30 days of treatment). The desired goal was to reduce early discharges from 44% to 35% (a 20% improvement).

Key Issues Identified and Actions Taken
Issue #1:
New clients (those in treatment for less than two months) felt that the intake process was too impersonal and that the many rules and responsibilities were very overwhelming. In addition, too many agency staff members were involved in the intake process.

Rapid Change Cycle #1 (initiated 2/27/06):
New clients would not be given any community responsibilities for the first 15 days in treatment. New clients were encouraged to be self-paced during their first two weeks in treatment. The change allowed for maximum flexibility, and a client-driven orientation to treatment.

Issue #2:
New clients did not like having to find someone in the program to be with them at all times during the first 15 days in treatment (known as “finding” or “calling cover”). The clients found the process to be humiliating, and felt that it added pressure to the treatment and recovery process.

Rapid Change Cycle #2 (initiated 4/26/06):
New clients would no longer have to be “covered” by a peer during the first 15 days of treatment.

Issue #3:
Because of change #2, "Big Sisters" (clients who were in treatment for 90+ days) were disengaging from their "Little Sisters."

Rapid Cycle Change (initiated 5/24/06):
The treatment staff employed motivational enhancements with the Big Sisters. Along with a Change Team member, the Big Sisters developed a checklist of responsibilities and goals that they would attempt to meet on a weekly basis. The goals were designed to engage the little sisters in the treatment process. When a goal was reached, a reward would be given (a group activity such as a movie, coffee outing to Starbucks, pizza party, ice cream social, etc).

Results

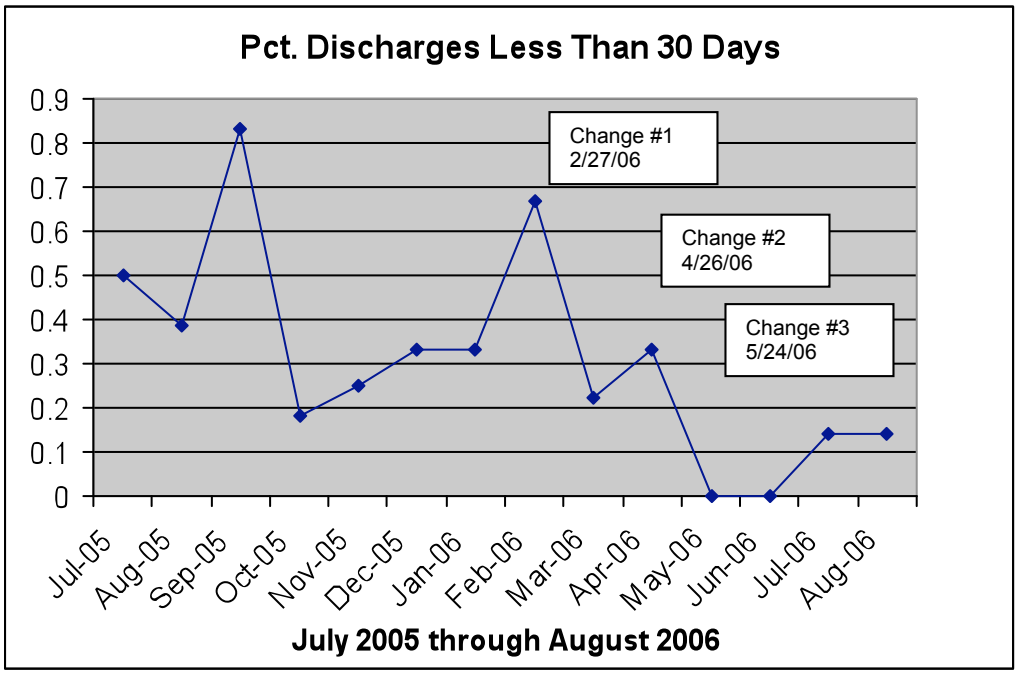

**Figure prepared by Holly McCravey, Via Avanta Change Leader, for the September 2006 Completion Conference.

In the five months spanning from February 27, 2006 to July 31, 2006, 35 women were admitted to *Via Avanta*, and a total of five (5) women were discharged within the first 30 days of treatment. The average early discharge rate over the five month period was 14%. Early discharge rates ranged from a low of 0% in May and June 2006 to a high of 33% in April 2006, as evidenced by the above figure.

The initial goal was to decrease the early discharge rate by 20% (from 44% to 35%). The Via Avanta Change Team was able to exceed their expectations, by decreasing the early discharge rate by 68% (from 44% to 14%).

A side effect of this improvement was an increase in clients' average length of stay, from approximately 125 days (in the five months prior to the project) to 175 days (in the five months of change project implementation). Additionally, there were about 30 fewer admissions than usual between March and July, but because the women were staying in treatment longer, the residential program contracts were maximized (hence, Via Avanta was getting "more bang for

their buck"). Counselors were afraid that if clients were given the choice of not participating that they would not. But the clients still chose to participate (perhaps because of peer pressure). Eventually, they showed up to group sessions and participated fully in program activities.

Lessons learned

Initially, the Via Avanta Change Team (made up of treatment staff, as well as office management staff) met every week. As time went on, the meetings were held less frequently, and by the end of the project, the team was meeting on a monthly basis. The Executive Sponsor (Bill Dombrowski) attended the Change Team meetings whenever possible.

To date, every change that was made has been kept in place. The Change Team decided to add motivational incentives to the previous change cycles to handle client reaction to previous change cycles. The clients loved the changes. Staff members were slightly hesitant initially to believe that the changes they made were responsible for the reduced drop-out rate. It had to be brought to their attention that they were retaining clients in treatment for a longer period of time.

During the completion conference, Holly McCravey presented several lessons learned, which are outlined below:

- The Change Leader and Change Team must stay focused and committed to improvement;
- New ideas can get lost if not implemented;
- Improvement is a process that does not end – it is ongoing;
- Statistics help with evaluation and accountability;
- Positive changes need to be reinforced as soon as possible
- The project resulted in an agency culture change; and
- By brainstorming new ideas, the team discovered ways to make an improvement that could save a life.