



Creating a Welcoming Environment

Mid-Columbia Center for Living

Abstract

Mid-Columbia Center for Living was having problems with clients appearing quite anxious and irritable in their reception area. Realizing that the waiting room's environment was not comfortable or welcoming, Mid-Columbia's staff embarked on a project to make the areas where clients spend the most time feel as welcoming and comfortable as possible. With little financial expenditure, they succeeded in creating a truly welcoming environment that has had a considerable positive effect on their clients.

Aim:

Increase Treatment Continuation Rates

Promising Practice:

[Therapeutic engagement:](#)

Create a positive environment within the agency by welcoming first and processing later

Keywords:

Patient involvement, change exercise, Change Leader



Network for the Improvement of Addiction Treatment <http://www.NIATx.net>

Reduce Waiting & No-Shows • Increase Admissions & Continuation



Mona, a dually diagnosed client who is naturally anxious and irritable, enters the treatment agency's waiting room for her monthly appointment. Confronted by a cold, colorless, sterile room with institutional seats facing each other and only official-looking notices on the walls, Mona is visibly uncomfortable in the room. She can't sit still; she gets up and paces. After only a couple minutes in the waiting room, Mona approaches the front desk to complain about the length of time she has had to wait.

The environment created by the waiting room exacerbates Mona's natural anxiousness, and makes other clients uncomfortable. Staff at the Mid-Columbia Center for Living in Dalles, Oregon had recently embarked on a project that involved thinking about treatment access and retention issues from the perspective of their clients. They thought that making changes to their waiting room would be both an easy place to start and a quick and inexpensive way to make the kind of changes that subtly but effectively impact clients.

Agency Services

Mid Columbia Center for Living (MCCFL) is a comprehensive community mental health agency that is responsible for both direct and contracted services. The services provided include alcohol and drug rehabilitation, mental health services and services to persons with developmental disabilities. Offices for addictions prevention and treatment services are located in four towns in rural Oregon: The Dalles (pop. 12,250), Hood River (pop. 6,210), Condon (pop. 770) and Arlington (pop. 530). MCCFL provides a full continuum of treatment options: outpatient services, intensive outpatient/partial hospitalization, residential/inpatient services and medically managed inpatient treatment.

The Impetus for Environmental Changes

Having recently returned from the first NIATx meeting, MCCFL staff member Kendra Duby shared with her colleagues the story of [Perinatal Treatment Services](#) (PTS) in the Seattle area. Like MCCFL, PTS was also considering the [perspective of their clients](#) in efforts to improve their treatment delivery services, and PTS found that making changes in the waiting room was a rapid and inexpensive way to begin. PTS's example sparked a discussion about the MCCFL Dalles office's current waiting room, a source of dismay among clients and staff for many years. Immediately following this discussion, MCCFL's Dr. James MacMillan, Christian Anderson, and Kendra Duby rearranged the seating, which instantly made the waiting room feel less confrontational.

During this process, staff members Susan Ross and Delia Magana assisted with suggestions and advice. To make the waiting room more inviting, they decided to bring more plants into the room, turn off the overhead fluorescent lighting, add floor lamps, and change the window treatment. Staff members graciously donated plants, including a flowering amaryllis, and lights from their own offices. Susan Ross offered some fabric she had at home but wasn't using, and actually made new curtains for the waiting room. Christian Anderson removed the door in order to create more space and access to the room. All bulletin boards and informational posters were relocated to the restrooms, and Susan Ross and Delia Magana both donated pictures and wall hangings from their offices in order to make the



waiting room feel less institutional and more like a living room. Kendra Duby donated a pillow and throw to the seating areas as well as a tablecloth for a side table. Kirby Richards, Susan Ross, and Delia Magana assisted with the decoration process. Staff also discussed relocating a ceiling fan from a storage area to the waiting room to improve air quality and relieve stuffiness.

After consulting with management, staff member Shaleen Jacobsen reported to the team that the agency would pay for a new ceiling fan to be purchased and installed in the waiting room. Additionally, management offered to purchase new flooring for the waiting room since the current carpet is fairly stained. These two improvements will be completed in the near future.

Monetary Cost

The immediate changes to the waiting area were done without additional cost to the agency, because the staff found ways to use their current resources in a different manner. To improve the aesthetics and environment of the areas used by their clients, staff moved artwork from their own offices. “Homey” touches such as plants and soft lamps were also moved from other areas of the building. Staff devoted time and effort to the improvements, brainstorming ideas and putting them into action, and made the changes happen quickly. The anticipated new ceiling fan and flooring will likely be added for modest cost from the agency budget.

Responses to the Improvement

Staff members Susan Ross and Delia Magana work in the reception area, and began hearing comments from clients began on the same day that the changes were begun. As a record of the response to the agency’s first [change exercise](#), Susan and Delia began writing down these client comments:

November 4, 2003 - four clients (both men and women) said that the room looked nice, was more comfortable, that the plants were nice and they liked the softer lighting.

November 5, 2003 - Two clients said that they liked the changes.

November 5, 2003 - One woman said that she was unsure but thought she would like it once she got used to it

November 6, 2003 - One woman smiled as she spoke to staff (this was unusual for her). She sat contently and looked at the amaryllis while she waited. Typically, this client was impatient in the waiting area.

November 6, 2003 - One client commented that the plants looked nice. Another exclaimed, “Wow, I thought I was in the wrong place for a minute.” A third client said, “Way cool, it used to be more official and now it is friendlier.” Another client that day said that it felt safe and asked to come in early for appointments in order to read in the waiting room.



Network for the Improvement of Addiction Treatment <http://www.NIATx.net>



Reduce Waiting & No-Shows • Increase Admissions & Continuation

November 7, 2003 - A client said that the amaryllis was nice.

November 13, 2003 - A woman commented that the waiting area looked nice. She said that it was friendly and comfortable and that she really liked the curtains.

Positive comments continue to be made. A few more recent comments include:

December 17, 2003 - One woman said the rearranged waiting room was the first thing she noticed (she had not been in for awhile). This client commented, "It looks so nice and warm and friendly, so much better than it was before. The artwork is so nice to look at and the colors are beautiful. Whoever decorated knew what they were doing. They did a great job".

December 19, 2003 - Two additional compliments were made. One client, just released from jail, commented on the plants in the waiting room and indicated that it was more comfortable. (This is another client who was typically unable to sit for any period of time, but today he was able to sit and remain calm while waiting for his therapist.) He said that he felt good in the waiting room.

A family member of a client commented on how nice the change was from when she had been in before. She was pleased to see the positive changes and comfortable atmosphere of the new waiting room. She expressed that she no longer felt threatened while waiting for her family member. She said that this was a good change for everyone and that she appreciated the efforts.

Lessons Learned

Improving the appearance of the waiting room at the Dalles office of Mid-Columbia Center for Living happened quickly and at a minimal monetary cost. Once the discussion about remodeling got underway, numerous changes were made within an hour, but the effects were described as dramatic.

Staff and clients alike have been responding positively to the changes in the waiting area. The magazines that were always there are finally being read, and a couple clients actually come early for appointments to read. People are more patient and pleasant, and children are exhibiting better behavior in the waiting area. Mona and other anxious clients are responding better to the new environment as well, and appear more comfortable and calm as they wait for their appointments.

[Change Leader](#) David Mason described the environmental changes as being like "starting a snowball for caring about clients." These changes have brought to light the importance of asking for client opinions and providing an attractive physical environment.

Contact Information: Change Leader, David Mason – david_a_mason@class.orednet.org