**WORKGROUP MEETING #2**

**Workforce Meeting Discussion Summary**

**8/9/23, 12:00 – 1:00**

At the heart of the discussions was the significant role played by direct care staff and others who provide hands-on services to the individuals we serve. Workers are leaving us due to a variety of factors far too numerous to name; however, acute concerns include increased demands placed on these workers due to staffing shortages and the increased acuity of the individuals served. The financial implications were also a major point of discussion, with an emphasis on calculating the costs associated with Minimum Wage compression and the Bonus Program where not all staff were treated equitably. All of these factors have led to a need for more intensive supervision without which providers say they are more likely to lose staff, and clients experience more frequent hospitalizations. It was noted that when staffing levels are appropriate and supervision is adequate, retention improves.

The challenges associated with retention of new staff, especially those fresh out of school, remains intense. Newer workers require more intense supervision. A proposed solution to this challenge is a stronger partnership with educational institutions. By focusing on marketing and creating programs that highlight the intrinsic value of this work, there is potential to attract more individuals to the field. Yet, the absence of student loan forgiveness, particularly for non-clinical staff stand as a barrier. It was noted that while OMH put up a Community Mental Health Loan Program, OASAS did not match this opportunity with its funds.

The unique position of peers in the workforce was also highlighted. The challengelies in providing them with clear career advancement paths without diluting their distinct role as peers. The discussion also touched upon the unsatisfactory reimbursement rates for peers. Compensation was a dominant theme. While bonuses are appreciated, they often inadvertently lead to disparities among staff members, which, in turn, causes friction.

Participants agreed that regular salary increments, and adequate starting salaries have a more lasting impact than one-off bonuses. This sentiment was further underscored by concerns about staff bearing increased expenses associated with benefits. Suggestions to remedy this included a full cover for health insurance for all staff and support for some educational credits. The challenge of hiring staff for residential roles (in some cases we are paying staff to sleep) at the current minimum wage was also brought up, emphasizing the need for a more competitive compensation structure. An important takeaway is that it is no longer possible to attract new staff based on the benefits we offer since staff are paying for a significant portion of their benefits so, we are left with low salaries and we have lost a tool that may once have attracted staff – a good benefits package.

**2. Tactics & Tools**

* **Surveys**

These were identified as essential tools to gather comprehensive insights into the workforce challenges. At the present time a group of 12 associations is surveying BH providers along a number of data points, all very focused on vacancies and turnover however more is needed to round out the picture we want to paint based on additional important data points.

* **Data Collection**
  + Information from Exit Interviews: The value of exit interviews was recognized as a means to understand the reasons behind staff departures, thus offering actionable insights.
  + Quantitative Data to include Cost of Turnover, Cost of Training and Re-Training, Changes to Benefits Packages over time in terms of % of employee contributions

Proposal for Flexible Work Arrangements: Given the needs and desires of the current workforce, a move towards more flexible work structures should be considered.

**3. Action Steps**

**Prepare survey:** An immediate step to ensure a more extensive collection of relevant data on workforce challenges with oversight by members of this group so as to avoid asking questions that are not direct or where data is not available.

**4. Longer Term Next Steps**

**Professional Development for Peers:** The establishment of clear, structured career paths for peers, ensuring they retain their unique roles. Reassessment of Compensation Models: A comprehensive review and potential overhaul of compensation structures, emphasizing regular salary increments over occasional bonuses.