

TO: ALL

FROM: JC

DATE: May 21, 1990

RE: Definitions of "self-help groups" and "empowerment" developed in CI-1

At its second meeting on April 29-30, the CI-1 advisory board developed working definitions of both "self-help groups" and "empowerment." Since a number of people have mentioned to me that they would find these definitions helpful, I am circulating them.

The board agreed on criteria for self-help groups as follows:

- 1) Groups are local and grass roots (although they may be affiliated regionally, statewide, or nationally).
- 2) The group controls its own budget, staffing, and governing body.
- 3) The group's philosophy is developed by the group members and not imposed from the outside.
- 4) Membership and participation are voluntary.
- 5) The group is flexible and doesn't have a set program that everyone must follow.
- 6) Membership is open to past or present "mental patients" (in-patients or out-patients) and usually to people who consider themselves "at risk." Members self-define themselves as mental health clients (or whatever term they may use, e.g., ex-patient, consumer, survivor, etc.)
- 7) The group is participatory.
- 8) The group focuses on a people-to-people non-clinical approach.

The board defined empowerment as follows:

- Having decision-making power
- Having access to information and resources
- Having a range of options from which to make choices (not just yes/no, either/or)
- Assertiveness
- A feeling that the individual can make a difference (being hopeful)
- Learning to think critically; unlearning the conditioning; seeing things differently, e.g.:
 - Learning to redefine who we are (speaking in our own voice)
 - Learning to redefine what we can do
 - Learning to redefine our relationships to institutionalized power
- Learning about and expressing anger
- Not feeling alone; feeling part of a group
- Understanding that a person has rights
- Effecting change in one's life and one's community
- Learning skills (e.g., communication) which the person him/herself defines as important
- Changing other's perceptions of one's competency and capacity to act
- Coming out of the closet
- Growth and change that is never-ending and self-initiated
- Increasing one's positive self-image and overcoming stigma

Please let me know any thoughts you might have about these definitions.

/hs