

# **Project Return: The Next Step**

## ***"Taking Charge Together"***

### **What is Project Return: The Next Step?**

Like the original Project Return, Project Return: The Next Step is a network of self-help clubs throughout Los Angeles County. *Unlike* the original, it is staffed and run by individuals who have been diagnosed with a mental illness and who have been consumers of mental health services.

On July 1, 1992, Project Return grew into Project Return: The Next Step. More than 40 people, most of whom had been active leaders in Project Return for years, applied for positions as Next Step staff and advisory board members. From this field of highly qualified applicants, seven staff members were chosen to serve as program coordinator, administrator and regional aides. Twenty more were selected to serve on the advisory committee which will meet monthly to guide the project.

Next Step staff were chosen after a lengthy interview process. Finalists for the coordinator and administrator positions met with a panel of four advisory committee members: Andy Posner, first president of the original Project Return federation and executive director of Project BACUP, a consumer-run agency that helps individuals obtain benefits; Gail Green, former Project Return federation president, an MHA board member and Project Return Player; Jim Freeda, founder of the award-winning Long Beach Peer Advocates; and Quindella Harris, a federation officer and leader at Oasis House. The panel selected Ken Brassner, formerly a South Bay facilitator, as Next Step's coordinator and Pearl Johnson, an active Oasis House member, as administrator. With the assistance of the advisory committee, Ken then hired the five regional aides.

During the first advisory committee meeting in July, members established the new program's name as Project Return: The Next Step and its motto - "Taking Charge Together."

The goal of Project Return: The Next Step is to become its own consumer-run nonprofit agency with its advisory committee becoming its board of directors. Currently, Next Step, like the original Project Return, is under the umbrella of the Mental Health Association (MHA) in Los Angeles County and its headquarters are at MHA's downtown office.

The coming year will be one of growth and training for Next Step staff, advisory committee and members. The first challenge will be weathering the transition from the original Project Return. Change is always difficult for everyone. And changing the direction of a successful program like Project Return -- which has been an important part of many members' lives -- will be especially difficult.

### **Why The Next Step?**

The original Project Return started in 1980 with one club and seven members. In over a decade it grew into a countywide federation of more than 60 clubs with 2000 members. When Project Return began, it was revolutionary in its vision. It was founded on the belief that mental health consumers, given the opportunity, could play a leadership role in establishing a social network for themselves.

Even though Project Return members were leaders in the federation and in their own clubs, the program was not totally run and operated by its membership. Members relied heavily on MHA staff and on volunteer facilitators to take the lead in planning and carrying out club activities.

In the mid-1980s, two major factors began affecting Project Return, its premise and its future. One was the need for more services than the club format could offer. Another was the beginning of the client-empowerment movement.

Project Return club meetings allowed members an opportunity to discuss their goals and look at ways to accomplish them, but the meetings didn't offer them the follow-through support many members needed to make major life changes such as finding a job or moving into their own apartments.

In response to client input, MHA and other providers began looking at the need for social and, eventually, employment opportunities that extended beyond the once-a-week club format. The result was the establishment of programs such as Oasis House in South-Central Los Angeles and the social/employment centers in Long Beach and Antelope Valley.

Meanwhile, the client-empowerment movement grew stronger. Clients wanted a larger voice in designing and running mental health services. In 1987, BACUP -- a client-operated program assisting other clients to obtain benefits and entitlements -- started up. It has survived and thrives to this day. At the same time, a Project Return club in Long Beach evolved into the Long Beach Peer Advocates, a member-run self-help club which won the 1991 Prevention Award from the state Department of Mental Health. And, in August of 1991, 3000 clients from all over the country gathered in Oakland, California for the Alternatives '91 conference in a show of strength and capability unimaginable a decade ago.

*Why Project Return: The Next Step?* Because the time was right, and because Project Return members have shown that they are ready, able and anxious to take charge of their clubs and their lives. It is time for members to create and run their own program, one that reflects *their* goals, *their* desires and *their* needs.

### How Will 'The Next Step' Work?

Project Return: The Next Step will operate pretty much like the original Project Return. The clubs will still meet weekly. Some will keep their volunteer facilitators until they feel strong enough to operate more independently.

Each club will have a regional aide who is a member of the Next Step staff. Regional aides will visit clubs once or twice a month to help club members take charge of their meetings and plan their activities. Regional aides will be available to club members by telephone and beeper.

The Next Step coordinator, administrator and advisory board members also are available to members and want all members to become more actively involved than ever in helping them plan and guide the future of Project Return: The Next Step.

That future looks bright and promising. But there will be many curves in the road to independence that lies ahead. Now is the time for all Project Return members, who have been "helping people to help themselves" to "take charge together" and take Project Return into its next successful decade.

## How to Contact Project Return: The Next Step

Offices are located at the:

Mental Health Association in Los Angeles County  
1336 Wilshire Blvd.

Los Angeles, CA 90017-1705

213/413-1130, ext 33

The coordinator and administrator can be reached by phone during office hours, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday. They and regional aides can also be "beeped" at the following numbers.

**Next Step Coordinator, Ken Brassner**

Beeper # - 310/523-7421

**Next Step Administrator, Pearl Johnson**

Beeper # - 213/951-6560

### Regional Aides -

David James 818/850-6612 - San Gabriel Valley

Bill Compton 213/951-6843 - Westside/Hollywood

Margaret Keller 310/761-9816  
Long Beach/South Bay

Linda Jones

Southeast/Compton/Bell Gardens

Eric Himelstein

San Fernando Valley - 818/587-8602