

January 19, 2006

Marvin Southard, D.S.W., Director
Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health
550 S. Vermont Ave., 12th Floor
Los Angeles, CA 90020

Dear Dr. Southard:

With the first half of our 2005-2006 operating year over, I would like to update you on Project Return: The Next Step's (PR:TNS) progress. As always, we appreciate your commitment to the growth of consumer-run options and your confidence in our work.

It's been another busy six months for us. In my letter last May, I shared PR:TNS' strategic goals and an operating plan for this fiscal year. As I wrote, our intent was to identify how we could enhance our services, expand our staff's skills, empower others, and excel as a consumer-run, recovery-oriented program for Los Angeles County.

It's been exciting (and sometimes exhausting!) as we've gone from idea to implementation. In this letter, I'll focus on three of our goals: 1) **wellness centers** and how we are helping to advance a consumer-run model; 2) **work** and the achievements of our staff and consumers we are training from across the county and 3) **welcoming back** individuals back into the community and helping them access services with our Project Return: The First Step bridging project.

PR:TNS staff, members and I appreciated the opportunity to participate in the Department's stakeholder process. As we looked through the adult community services and supports plan, we believe that PR:TNS has an important role to play.

The three areas I'm discussing today have the same aims as the CSS plan – to engage, employ and empower people with mental illness to recover to healthy lives. I see that Wellness Centers are the first service listed in the "Systems Development Investments," and we feel that these can be a way to reach out to the unserved and underserved populations and parts of the county.

But first, I need your support to help solidify our two existing Wellness Centers. As I wrote last year, these are our top priority, and we believe that it is important to continue to design and demonstrate a model we hope will be helpful across the county.

Wellness Centers

In my last letter to you, I discussed how the Wellness Centers had the potential to be a model in our county and across the state, and we are delighted by how quickly this approach has been accepted and adopted.

As you know, my staff and I participated in the planning of the Wellness Centers parameters. At PR:TNS, our focus will continue to be on designing and demonstrating consumer-run Wellness Centers, which we have named **Pathway to Wellness**. As with all PR:TNS services, we see peer support as the foundation of our centers and want to offer as wide a variety of recovery, health education, wellness support and community involvement as possible.

Let me update you on our existing centers – the Pearl Ella Johnson Wellness Center at Augustus Hawkins and our Long Beach Wellness Center, which is located near a number of programs who use its services. Here are some of the lessons we've learned over the past year:

- that consumer-run centers and the people we serve benefit from the complimentary efforts of self-help and professional services;
- that it is essential to create a culture that honors each individual's – members, peer supporters and professional staff – gifts, talents, and skills;
- that the centers must carry the message of recovery. It's the context of everything we do – from welcoming individuals through working with them on their own goals for healthy lives; and
- that community is a critical component because of how it benefits consumers' lives as well as the life of our center when we become active in the community.

As our first center, the Long Beach Pathway to Wellness continues to be the “living laboratory” where we define and refine our model; a number of the above concepts came from its creative staff and members. For example, along with the Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP), we have added “Core Gifts.” We've carried the recovery message beyond PR:TNS and the MHA Village; most notably, we have built a good relationship with St. Mary's Hospital in Long Beach.

One of our most immediate concerns is with the location of the Pearl Ella Johnson Center, which currently is at Augustus Hawkins Mental Health Center. We feel it is imperative that the center move out into the community, where it can be independent and develop its own identity as a voluntary, welcoming service. The CSS plan echoes this emphasis and encourages that Wellness Centers be located in their own buildings central to other community resources. A move would require funds for rent, utilities and professional services. I'll discuss this in the funding section.

For the future, our priority would be to open a consumer-run bilingual “Pathway to Wellness” in the southeast section of the county, specifically the unserved “Seven Cities” of Service Area 7. We would adopt the model to provide culturally relevant services while addressing the needs of an unserved area. A Wellness Center, we believe, would be a less-stigmatizing way to reach out to the Latino community, which often isn't comfortable with mental health issues.

There is a tremendous potential for developing our Antelope Valley Discovery Center. It already has a site in the community, strong consumer staff, spirit of self-help and sense of involvement in the community. We would need to integrate mental and physical health education and support strategies to help individuals continue in their recovery and pursue their goals for healthy lives.

Work

I am proud to report our success in attracting new staff who have degrees and in advancing our existing staff's abilities through our internal training. Staff development continues to be a commitment of our program as we prepare for the growing role of quality consumer-run services

through the Mental Health Services Act.

Quite frankly, our staff is the highest qualified PR:TNS has ever had. We have 15 staff who have college degrees (masters, bachelors or associate level) and 60 percent of our staff have three or more years of employment with us. I think this reflect two facts: 1) there are well-educated consumers out there who can be leaders and 2) with professional development, consumers can move up the career ladder. Most of PR:TNS' full-time staff – associate directors, program coordinators and regional aides – began as stipend club aides or part-time workers.

Of course, education, experience and longevity mean higher staff costs. As I've shared with you many times, I'm committed to comparable wages for consumer staff. Our PR:TNS staff are paid on the same salary scale, have the same benefits and receive merit increases exactly as other staff at the Mental Health Association. We are running a deficit in our staffing expenses.

I am just as proud of PR:TNS' work to help other consumers prepare for MHSA peer supporter and advocate jobs. On Feb. 6, we are beginning our sixth "Introduction to Peer Support" course. Like past sessions, this will be an intensive, three-week training course for consumers who want to work in the public/nonprofit mental health field. Our training covers competencies such as basic attitudes and skills for human service work; effective communication skills; peer group facilitation; culturally competent services; and record keeping and reporting.

To date, four sessions were provided through our contract with the Department and one was sponsored by Los Angeles Hope, a program of the City of Los Angeles. Of the 75 graduates of the first three sessions, 60 percent went on to jobs. Most are working full-time; others are in part-time positions. There also are a number of volunteers

We see this as a service that can grow as the Department identifies consumer programs and positions in MHSA community services and support programs.

Welcoming Back – Project Return: The First Step

We believe that Project Return: The First Step – our peer bridging project with IMDs, hospital and jail – also has the potential to play a pivotal role as the Department begins its MHSA plan.

Currently, we work with nine IMDs, two augmented board and care facilities, two wards at Metropolitan State Hospital and the L.A. County Jail. We bring peer support and self-help groups to clients in these facilities and then make follow-up visits as they transition to board and care homes. We connect them with PR:TNS clubs near their homes and with our other services, such as the "Friendship Line" after-hours support line, so they can continue to have the support they need – provided by their peers – in the community.

As the county implements its plan, I would like to come back to you with a plan for how Project Return: The First Step can help the county's bridging service needs.

Funding Request

I want to present our growth and funding needs on two levels: 1) what we need now to sustain and solidify our programs and 2) our priorities for expansion.

Immediate Needs

I am requesting an augmentation to our contract to operate our consumer-run Wellness Centers fully. As I wrote last year, our two existing Wellness Centers have about half of the funds they need. This fiscal year, our contract is \$250,000 to cover both centers. As of December 31, we have spent \$275,000, so we project a \$300,000 deficit for this year. Over the past year, the Mental Health Association has been able to cover some of the difference; now, we need to cover MHA's contribution.

This amount does not include enhancements. We especially need to strengthen the staffing for the Pearl Ella Johnson Center. Currently, we have limited time of a psychiatrist and do not have a nurse practitioner. Along with the peer supporters, this position is at the core of the wellness center concept. One of the main things we do is help individuals learn about the interaction between mental and physical health needs, and it takes the support of a nurse practitioner skilled in both areas.

Our Long Beach site is running at a large deficit. As our "living laboratory," we need to be able to define and refine our consumer-run model. To do that, we need to cover our core operations.

We have space needs for both centers. Our priority is to rent a community site for the Pearl Ella Johnson Center that is accessible to Augustus Hawkins clients and individuals in other programs. We will need to make sure that rent and utility funds are sufficient, along with having funding for any one-time renovations we might need to make. In Long Beach, we have the opportunity for four more classrooms; we'd love to be able to add a literacy center. Our hope is to be able to rent and renovate this extra space.

Additionally, PR:TNS' other operations will have a \$100,000 deficit this year. This reflects the increased staffing costs I described above.

In all, we request \$400,000 for the current fiscal year to cover the \$300,000 for the two Pathway to Wellness centers and \$100,000 for our other existing services. This does not include any of the enhancements (such as the new or additional space for the centers) or any expansion.

Future Funding

We are excited about the possibility of expanding the consumer-run Pathway to Wellness concept to underserved areas, such as Service Area 7 and the Antelope Valley. We also would like to come back to you with a plan for enhancing our bridging services.

On another note, I enjoyed being on KPCC's "Talk of the Town" with you a couple of weeks ago. As I said there, I believe that consumers can take greater responsibility and show the beneficial role that consumer-run services can have in our mental health system.

I look forward to continuing to work with you on this goal.

Sincerely,

William H. Compton Jr., Director
Project Return: The Next Step