

## **MHSOAC STAKEHOLDER'S PUBLIC COMMENT & PARTICIPATION TRAINING PROGRAM**

### **1. HISTORY**

Following a period of research and deliberation, the MHSOAC's Client and Family Leadership Committee (CFLC) designed and submitted a series of recommendations for improving public comment at MHSOAC meetings. The MHSOAC approved the majority of these recommendations on January 28, 2010. This action was aligned with the MHSA's mission, as the MHSA (W&I Code § 5846(e)) mandates the MHSOAC to take into account the perspectives of clients and family members as guiding influences in all decisions.

### **2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The relevant recommendations put forward by the CFLC and approved by the Commission were:

- *“Provide a training to stakeholders on how to give public comment (this could be a brown bag session during lunchtime at a Commission meeting)”*
- *“Mentoring (stakeholders who are experienced in public comment should Public Participation Assistant less experienced stakeholders)”*

In both cases, the CFLC undertook responsibility for implementing the recommendations.

### **3. TRAININGS STRUCTURE**

The CFLC proposes to facilitate monthly trainings to clients, family members and/or the general public on how to make effective public comments at MHSOAC meetings. The trainings are designed to provide both support and structure to the individuals who make public comments.

The training content will consist of an introduction to the MHSOAC public comment process and its two categories:

- Comment in response to agenda items; and
- General public comment.

The trainings will be conducted beginning with a 15-minute Introduction prior to the start of the MHSOAC meeting and will be the concluding segment of the pre-meeting Orientation. Another, more detailed training will be offered during the lunch break, approximately 30-45 minutes in duration. These will be held either in the same space as where the main meeting is located, or in a nearby meeting space, as available.

In addition, a five-minute tutorial, or “crash course,” should be developed that CFLC Trainers/Public Participation Assistants can provide to meeting participants at any time during the meeting in a location suitable for that purpose.

Trainings will be open to all MHSOAC meeting participants who have an interest in attending, and will be conducted by at least one CFLC member and one staff member.

CFLC member-volunteers will be selected monthly at the Committee meeting held before the next MHSOAC meeting. An effort will be made to rotate this responsibility monthly, and to allow for two

CFLC facilitators whenever possible. If possible, a “calendar” could be created in advance, scheduling volunteers for future trainings.

#### 4. TRAINING CURRICULUM

To be most effective in assisting the largest possible number of participants, on the assumption that they may have widely differing communications styles, the tone of the trainings will be conversational and highly interactive. Specific issues to be addressed in the course of this “conversation” should include:

- a) Introduction to Public Comment
  - The role of client, family-member and community participants at MHSOAC meetings.
  - The importance of public comment and input.
  - Review of practical tips and “best practices” for public comment. (For example, how to properly identify oneself and provide, if relevant, any organizational affiliation or the County one is from; how to focus on the main points one wants to make and craft one’s statements to fit within a three-minute timeframe; how to compose one’s statements, with a beginning, a middle and a conclusion; how to connect one’s personal experience to one’s comments; how to write brief “speaker’s notes” to refer to when making public comment).
  - Examine the supports that could be provided by CFLC members during the public comment process.
  - Provide an overview to possible public participation *beyond* the MHSOAC meetings, including the role of the Committees, and state-level and local MHSA-related entities and mechanisms.
- b) Public Comment on Agenda Items
  - What steps need to be taken to make a public comment on a specific agenda item?
  - Q&A regarding items on the agenda for that day’s MHSOAC meeting.
  - Review of “best practices” for public comment on an agenda item (For example: Specifying whether one is for or against the particular issue under discussion -- or some part of it -- and providing a rationale for one’s position.)
- c) General Public Comment
  - What steps need to be taken to make a general public comment?
  - At what times during the meeting are general public comments taken?
  - Know what the Commission wants to hear. (For example, how is MHSA working for your community and/or what are your suggestions for improvement?) Know what issues are within the scope of the Commission’s work.

More interactive components could include participant “rehearsals” of their public comment or role-playing involving Trainers and participants.

#### 5. MENTORING: CFLC PUBLIC PARTICIPATION ASSISTANCE

CFLC mentors, or “Public Participation Assistants,” will work to “operationalize” the forms of assistance offered to clients, family members and the general public at the more information-oriented

Introduction to Public Comment and Training sessions, with the intent of facilitating their effective participation in the public comment processes at MHSOAC meetings.

Even though ‘training’ and ‘mentoring’ are referred to here as distinct activities, the boundaries between the two should be minimal and our efforts to assist the public as seamless as possible. In reality, CFLC Trainers and Public Participation Assistants often will be the same persons, working to provide a consistent ‘continuum of service.’

a) Roles of a Public Participation Assistant

- A Public Participation Assistant’s duties include, but may not be limited to, interpreting the processes for public comment on agenda items and general public comment, and guiding/assisting participants through these processes (For example: Assisting with filling out and submitting the Public Comment Form; informally reviewing a participant’s proposed comment and making suggestions as to impact, composition and brevity; assisting participants to rehearse comments or engaging in role-playing.)
- Public Participation Assistants should position themselves in visible and key locations, such as at entryways or by the literature/sign-in table before meetings begin, so as to greet people as they arrive, introduce themselves, provide written materials and briefly explain the services they are available to provide and that these services are free of charge.
- CFLC Public Participation Assistants, acting primarily in a facilitation and support capacity, should strive to be good and sensitive listeners. They should be adept explaining not only the processes and procedures at work at the MHSOAC meetings, but also able to provide a glimpse of the larger context in which the MHSOAC operates, including the role of its Committees and its relationship to other state-level entities, as well as to avenues for public participation in local MHSOAC processes.
- While never presuming to influence a participant’s core ideas, CFLC Public Participation Assistants should exercise good judgment in assisting public speakers to avoid counter-productive, confrontational or disruptive behavior, and be able to advise them how to frame their message in ways that convince, rather than divide. Public Participation Assistants should aspire to be role models in showing how participants in a public forum can ‘agree to disagree.’
- Public Participation Assistants should take care to perform their duties in ways that are ‘public-driven,’ working to empower the people they inform and assist through giving people the support and tools that they need to speak out and advocate for themselves. Their actions should reflect a respectful spirit of partnership with members of the public

b) Selection of Public Participation Assistants

- CFLC members who undertake a Public Participation Assistant’s role for members of the public at MHSOAC meetings will be chosen from volunteers identified at the Committee meeting prior to the Commission meeting in question. If possible, a ‘calendar’ could be created in advance, scheduling volunteers for meetings farther into the future.
- If possible, as many of these volunteers as possible should participate in the morning’s orientation/training session before the Commission meets.
- The Committee should aim to provide at least two Public Participation Assistants at the Commission’s meetings, and these volunteers should be able to be present for the entire

meeting period. If more Public Participation Assistants are available, then “shifts” can be arranged for morning and afternoon sessions.

c) Identification

- Participating Committee members will wear a name badge displaying their names, the words “Client & Family Leadership Committee” and, in larger lettering, “PUBLIC PARTICIPATION ASSISTANT.”
- Depending on the tone of the interaction and upon their own judgment, Public Participation Assistants should be prepared to self-identify as consumers, family members and/or parents if they feel that doing so will enhance trust or a sense of identification with the person(s) they are assisting.

## 6. SUPPORTING MATERIALS

Training and Public Participation Assistant activities should be enhanced by the provision of simple and inexpensive supporting materials, in the form of written resources that make Commission proceedings more understandable and basic tools that make participation in the public comment process easier for meeting attendees. Written materials can be presented at the meetings in “hard copy” form, electronically on the MHSOAC website, and integrated into a PowerPoint format suitable for presentation as part of trainings held both at meetings and offered at other venues.

- An example of helpful written materials would include: A *glossary* of procedural terms used in Committee meetings, as well as commonly used names and abbreviations reflective of the world of mental health and its various entities; Information about the MHSOAC commissioners, including short **biographies**; Summary explanations of the MHSOAC and the roles played by both the MHSOAC and stakeholders (“**MHSA 101**”); A listing of relevant **resources**, including those agencies and stakeholder organizations that could provide more information or opportunities for advocacy, and; Brief *fact sheets* that summarize such things as the intent and content of these trainings, the role of Public Participation Assistants, the expectations for a person making public comment, etc. Fact sheets should also clearly indicate that all Public Participation Assistant’s services are offered free of charge.
- The above-mentioned materials could be assembled into a “participant’s packet” that could be provided to meeting attendees upon their arrival as a supplement to the meeting agenda and other traditional materials.
- Basic tools that would assist some members of the public in preparing and presenting their comments to the Commission should include Public Comment Cards, blank note cards or paper and pens or pencils. These latter items could be used to help organize thoughts prior to speaking -- with or without the assistance of a Public Participation Assistant, or to create a brief “script” to which the person can refer while speaking.

## 7. OUTREACH

Efforts should be made, prior to MHSOAC meetings, to provide written informational materials and materials supportive of an accessible public comment process to the communities and organizations from which public speakers are expected to come. Attempts should be made to identify and work with advocates affiliated with such communities and organizations, so that they can begin to instruct and assist persons who may wish to address the MHSOAC *before* meetings take place, building on existing

trust and relationships. This is especially important when MHSOAC meetings are held in locations other than Sacramento. Special efforts also should be made, and sensitivity should be shown, to the access-related requirements of those ethnic, linguistic and other special-needs or underrepresented populations in whose communities the MHSOAC or CFLC may meet.

## **8. LOGISTICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The above-detailed activities are extensive and ambitious in scope. Before launching these programs, CFLC members and staff need to “flesh out” these proposals and engage in an internal process of self-training and curriculum/materials development prior to “going public,” thus ensuring the highest possible quality of service to the public. Despite such efforts, however, the CFLC will no doubt discover many areas for improvement as these programs develop. A commitment to continuous quality assessment and improvement will be necessary to successfully assist the public.

Beyond the primary goal of assisting clients, family members and the general public to participate more effectively in MHSOAC public comment processes, the implementation of these training and Public Participation Assistance proposals would hopefully increase both the active participation and visibility of the CFLC at MHSOAC meetings.

In recognition of this expanded scope of practice, and the commitment of time that would be involved, efforts should be made, in conjunction with the Commission and staff, to facilitate the ability of Committee members to undertake this larger role. Accommodations should be considered, including those involving lodging, transportation, per diems, and solicitation of employers' support for CFLC members' increasingly important role in the MHSA.

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