

COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES – DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH

GUIDELINES FOR WORKING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN NON-CLINICAL STAFF AND CLIENTS

The Department of Mental Health (DMH) provides a broad range of services to assist our clients during their recovery journey. In addition to our professional and clerical/administrative staff, we foster a culture of recovery in our organization by hiring some former clients to work for us.

DMH employees who are clinicians have legal and ethical requirements enforced by their respective licensing boards that provide structure for the nature of their clinical relationships with clients. The purpose of these guidelines is to provide structure and rules for working relationships with clients. Additionally, these guidelines and rules also serve as guides for our paraprofessional, clerical, administrative, and other lay staff in DMH.

Role of the DMH Employee

DMH employees play a very important part in the experience that clients have when they enter our programs. Clients come to DMH for mental health services, often feeling vulnerable and anxious about what to expect. Our clients look to all DMH employees for guidance in their recovery. As a DMH employee, you are responsible for creating a caring, safe and professional environment for clients. In your role as a DMH employee, you have power, authority and influence over the services received by the client. Whether you are providing peer support services, financial eligibility screening, community outreach, or appointment services, you have an important role to serve with the overall care provided to our clients. You may make decisions, or influence decisions about client care. You may have access to the confidential information contained in the behavioral health record. Clients know that DMH employees have power and authority over them and the services provided to them. Therefore, you must be aware of how your actions may be perceived by clients.

Practice Self Awareness

Practicing continuous self-awareness in your working relationships with clients requires you to examine your words and actions, and make an honest evaluation of how they might be perceived. Areas to be aware of include using appropriate language for a professional setting, monitoring the tone and volume of your voice, respecting personal space, and refraining from physical contact with clients.

There are certain dynamics in your working relationships that may be danger signs that a relationship is becoming too personal or crossing important boundaries:

- • Excessive self-disclosure to a client that includes telling your own personal problems or details about intimate relationships;
- Sharing information only with a specific client and becoming secretive or defensive when questioned by others;
- Providing the client with your personal cell phone number, email address, or home address;
- Relying on a client for personal and emotional support;
- Dressing differently when seeing a particular client;
- Giving or receiving significant gifts;
- Favoring a certain client by giving special attention or time that is not made available to others;
- Engaging in flirtatious speech or mannerisms with a client.

If you are not certain if your behavior with clients may be inappropriate, you can always check it out with your supervisor, another team member, or the Human Resources Bureau.

Role Transition

DMH hires former clients as members of the DMH workforce and making the transition from client to employee is often a challenging journey. The DMH clinic where you used to receive service is no longer the place for you to receive care. You are now looked upon as a giver of services rather than a recipient. You may have made friends with other clients in the clinic where you have now become an employee. This situation can become what we call a "dual relationship." This results in you having dual relationships, meaning that your relationship with an individual may now be as both a friend and a DMH employee providing services at the same time. As friends, both you and the client historically have met each other's needs for social companionship. However, your first priority as a DMH employee is to ensure appropriate care for the client. As a DMH employee, the client now looks to you to be a service provider, and your own personal needs are secondary to the service needs of the client. You are now in a position of power over this person and may have access to very personal, confidential information about their mental health treatment. Therefore, you now have a working relationship rather than a personal one with clients. The consent of a client to a more personal relationship does not mean it is appropriate and it is not allowable for you as part of the DMH workforce to engage in anything other than a working relationship. You may need to seek advice from your supervisor to ensure that your interactions fall within the expectations of a DMH service provider.

Example:

You are a former client who is now a DMH employee, and you are friends with a current client at your work site. You have dual relationships with one person: as a friend, and as a service provider. You go to dinner with your friend/client on Saturday and the two of you have a disagreement during dinner. You both leave the restaurant feeling angry. The client comes to your work site for services on Monday morning and is scheduled to attend your daily living skills group. Both you and the client may feel uncomfortable at the work site due to the conflict in the friendship. These are the types of situations that you will need to speak to your supervisor about for coaching and guidance.

Confidential Information

As a DMH employee, you may have access to confidential medical records. All DMH staff members must have a clinical reason for accessing any type of medical record. It is not permissible to access any medical record for curiosity or personal reasons as this information is legally protected.

Physical Contact

Clients are looking for professional help from DMH, from employees that they can trust. Physical contact between a DMH employee and a client takes advantage of the client and may be more about meeting the needs or desires of the DMH employee rather than the needs of the client. Sitting too close to a client, giving a massage, or initiating hugging, can send an unspoken message to the client that the relationship has become more personal than professional. ANY sexual contact between a client and DMH employee is strictly forbidden. In most professional disciplines, dating activity between a mental health worker and a client should not occur earlier than two years following the termination of treatment, and is overall discouraged.

Conclusion

As a DMH employee, we expect you to self-monitor your role in working relationships with clients. You must be conscious of your role as an employee while you are providing services to clients, and recognize the distinction between your role as a friend and your role as a service provider. Your supervisor is available as a resource to you for coaching and guidance in your working relationships. Please take advantage of this resource, check in regularly, and especially when you feel in need of guidance.