

**Title of Presentation:** Fostering Growth in the Mental Health Sector: Using Program Development Research as a System Level Intervention and as a Tool to Strengthen Program Evaluation Research

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This paper presents the process of conducting a needs assessment study in collaboration with four mental health organizations, one of which was a consumer/survivor initiative. These organizations received funding to develop a precharge diversion program for persons with a mental illness (PwMI) in a large metropolitan Canadian city. Each funded organization is responsible for providing services in a different quadrant of that city. The aims of the needs assessment were: to identify similarities and differences in the local service delivery needs within the quadrants of the city, to assist the agencies with refining the program logic model for each quadrant, to identify best practices in diversion program models and to facilitate the future evaluation of the program. Drawing on our experience of conducting this needs assessment that involved input from varied stakeholders (e.g., PwMI, family members, mental health service providers, police, probation/parole), we demonstrate that program development research is itself an intervention that can promote understanding on the part of stakeholders thereby moving a project forward. For example, we observed that at a two-hour focus group a justice sector participant shifted his viewpoint on the role and thus potential activities that could be undertaken by his agency and that this occurred after he heard information from various mental health sector representatives. Had this person participated in a different way, such as through a one-to-one face or telephone interview, a shift in his thinking might not have occurred and certainly would not have happened so quickly (in under two hours). Other

examples relate to the differing philosophies of the three mental health agencies and the consumer survivor initiative. We further argue that sound program development research facilitates rigorous program evaluation research by enabling program stakeholders to identify and develop appropriate program monitoring mechanisms from the outset. In the case of the needs assessment, appropriate monitoring and evaluation criteria include those provided in recently released provincial government standards for mental health crisis outreach services, which are presented and discussed. Sound program development research also contributes to strengthening program evaluation research by: 1) sensitizing program stakeholders to the importance of process evaluation not just outcome evaluation, 2) fostering an appreciation for the ways in which variations in service delivery components in different areas should be taken into account in program evaluation research and 3) facilitating program stakeholders developing a common understanding of how program development and evaluation research should and can be linked.